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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

ELEMENTS OF THE GOTHIC IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD

BY

TRACEY GILLESPIE

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Elements of the Gothic in the Novels of Margaret Atwood submitted by Tracey Gillespie in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood, in her contemporary fiction, appropriates Gothic traditions as they are set out by Ann Radcliffe (The Italian), Jane Austen (Northanger Abbey), Emily Brontë (Wuthering Heights), and Charlotte Brontë (Jane Eyre and Villette). Atwood uses these conventions to question the sources of Gothic expectations as well as the results of the Gothic's pervasive stereotypes. Atwood's three most strongly Gothic novels--Lady Oracle, Bodily Harm, and The Handmaid's Tale--chronicle the lives of "Gothic" heroines who manage to break out of male-defined roles and forge their own identities, independent of patriarchal society's narrow parameters of female identity. In Atwood's hands, the Gothic becomes a political tool that disrupts the status quo and subverts dominant ideology. Her novels offer alternative endings to the standard Gothic's happily-ever-after marriages. By refusing to re-encapsulate the female fears and anxieties she raises, Atwood challenges our society's destructive stereotypes of gender and genre.

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Chapter I: The Gothic Tradition: Radcliffe, Austen, and the Brontës

According to Judith Wilt, "Gothic . . . has acquired in many people's minds the assumed modifier 'female' not only because of its main writers and readers but because of its deep revelations about gender, ego, and power."[1] The emergence of the female Gothic genre can be traced back to Ann Radcliffe and her "romances," such as The Italian (1797): its influence is felt in Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey (1818), Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights (1847), and Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) and Villette (1853). These authors' combined influence continues through to the present, where traces of the Gothic reverberate through Margaret Atwood's fiction, namely her three novels Lady Oracle (1976), Bodily Harm (1981), and The Handmaid's Tale (1985). This thesis is concerned with how Atwood appropriates these Gothic conventions in order to raise certain expectations in her readers, and how she subverts—thereby questioning the source and pervasiveness of—these expectations, especially the expectation of marriage as the happy ending. In the Gothic romance, states Janice Radway, "the happy ending is . . . a sign of a woman's attainment of legitimacy and personhood in a culture that locates both for her in the roles of lover, wife, and mother."[2] According to Suzanne Juhasz, "In women's fantasy, love and identity are

concurrent"[3]; in the romance, the heroine gains a self as well as the hero (Juhasz 246). In Austen's and the Brontës' fiction we see this formula tampered with, but not to the extent it has been subverted in Atwood's contemporary fiction. Atwood manipulates the standard Gothic conventions into a final outcome completely at odds with the Gothic romance tradition, especially as it is set out by Radcliffe, and as it is continued in present-day "popular" gothic romances of, for example, the Harlequin label. Popular Gothic romances (Joan Foster's "Costume Gothics," for example) embody the contemporary form of the Gothic novel that was created by Radcliffe, Austen, and the Brontës.

In order to understand Atwood's use of the Gothic, it is necessary to trace the Gothic back to its beginnings and to establish its generic conventions.

The Gothic is characterized by "otherness": outsiders, women, and foreigners have always dominated the classic Gothic romance (Wilt 101). What the Gothic really offers women, argues Cynthia Griffin Wolff, are "conventions for the rendering of feminine sexual desire,"[4] since, as Janice Radway argues, female sexuality is "always circumscribed by the romance's assumption that patriarchy, heterosexuality, and male personality are givens that are absolutely beyond challenge" (Radway, 1987, 143). The rendering of feminine sexuality is achieved primarily through the Gothic's specific handling of the literary constants of setting, character, and plot.

One of the common conventions emerging from typical Gothic

romances is the use of Gothic space, a convention with uniquely female connotations. Judith Wilt writes that "the [Gothic] space is unpredictably various, full of hidden ascents and descents, sudden turnings, unexpected subspaces, alcoves, and inner rooms, above all, full of long, torturous, imperfectly understood, half-visible approaches to the centre of suspense" (Wilt 10). Gothic novels are often set "inside" (as opposed to "outside"), corresponding to women's traditional space, the domestic sphere. The motif of the Gothic "house," states Wolff, "represent[s] the conflicting passions that may be housed within a single woman's body" (Wolff 210); the forbidden room (or passageway, or whatever) equals the woman's body: "inner space" is Gothic space. This concept is interesting in terms of female sexuality, which is traditionally hidden, mysterious, and forbidden. Gothic romances, in short, allow "their heroines [to] overcome challenges without leaving the house."[5]

The Gothic house itself is traditionally located in a foreign land. The Italian, for example, is set in Italy, an exotic place of "otherness" to its English author and readers; furthermore, in the novel, Ellena is spirited away to Schedoni's mansion in the northern reaches of Italy, a place totally unknown to her. While she ultimately spends the majority of her time inside, the Gothic heroine must still travel (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) to the house itself. In doing so, she is given the opportunity to pass through strange scenery and to view foreign sights. Moers states that "the Gothic novel was a device to send maidens on distant and exciting

journeys without offending the proprieties."[6] The Gothic heroine, states Wilt, "moves from the childhood familiar setting, to an intermediate series of exotic settings in which she is ignorant, exhilarated, and bewildered, to a final lonely crisis-setting in which the apparently frightening and the truly frightening alternate to bring terror and anxiety to its height" (Wilt 137). The exotic settings of the Gothic "radically displace reality by putting the action in distant times and strange and ghostly lands . . . [thus Gothic novels] become a site for the displacement of repressed wishes and fears,"[7] a site for the fantasies that are denied the reader by the "everydayness" of her own setting. This idea of the heroine-as-tourist, visiting a foreign land, is extremely important in Gothic fiction because it aids in furthering the myth of the heroine's uninvolvement and lack of control in her fate. However, as we will see in Atwood's fiction (especially Bodily Harm), this myth is ultimately harmful to the Gothic heroine: it gives her a false sense of security and allows her to avoid implication in what is happening around her.

The Gothic heroine's innocence and powerlessness point to her creator's complicity with the circumscription of female sexuality in a patriarchal society. Traditional heroines never experience physical passion because "passionate women corrupt the sanctioned institutions of society through their failure to perform their proper domestic roles in controlling sexuality, inspiring the man to be 'good,' and nurturing the members of the family unit."[8] The Gothic thus cloaks

sex in an aura of dreams, rendering it "safe"; the creators--and the readers--may think of sex subconsciously but would shrink from admitting it,[9] taboo as it is for women in this culture.

In some ways, however, "the romance is a defense against the male sexual forces that menace [the heroine]; at the same time, romance allows her to enjoy these forces."[10] This is achieved through the presence of a number of stock characters: the heroine, the hero, the villain, the "other woman" or villainess, the "good" mother and the "bad" mother. By transferring the heroine's sexuality to the men in the novel, the author allows her heroine to experience passion without responsibility. "The male villain expresses what the heroine dare not: her sexual desires, perhaps even sadomasochistic desires" (Holland and Sherman 285). The heroes of Gothic romances, furthermore, "enhanced the importance of women (for the men spend their full time 'plotting the seductions' of the heroines) and at the same time provide the means by which women can localize their diffuse and general sense of powerlessness" (Modleski 18). The presence of the female foil is also explained this way: the villainess, by embodying the heroine's sexuality, ensures that the heroine remains innocent. The villainess's death means that the heroine has successfully "killed off" her own sexuality and is thus able to marry the hero and live happily ever after in his patriarchal world. The "punishment" of the heroine by the hero, usually in the form of threats of physical force (rape), is sometimes interpreted as female masochism but, states Tania Modleski, it is actually "a 'cover' for

anxieties, desires, and wishes which if openly expressed would challenge the psychological and social order of things" (Modleski 30); that is, the heroine's questioning of the real motives behind male behavior would disrupt the male-dominated system of enforced female chastity. The mystery plot of the Gothic provides a convincing and different explanation for women's anxieties about male-dominated society, giving women an alternative focus for these fears,[11] thus avoiding their real origin, namely in the deeply-rooted misogyny of patriarchal society. "Readers of Gothic romances thus experience, without risk, both desire for and fear of penetration" (McMillan 52). This sexual ambivalence is part of the attraction of Gothic fiction: "unable to define their feelings about marriage, sex, and success, [readers] respond to the ambivalence they find in Gothic fiction" (Ronald 184).

Gothic novels thus function on one level to bring out women's fears about their ambiguous roles in male-dominated society--are they loved or hated? Will they be embraced or strangled?--fears which are resolved or re-encapsulated at the end of the novel so that the heroine (and the reader who identifies with her) feels satisfied with, even desirous of, her present role in society (Radway, 1987, 138). The Gothic romance provides a space where a woman's fears and "feminine resentment [are] fully justified and, instead of being sabotaged by the woman herself, [are] satisfied through locating and punishing a 'criminal' outside the self" (Modleski 83)--the villain or the villainess.

Joanna Russ argues that "[t]he Love Story is—for women—bildungsroman, success, failure, education, and the only adventure possible, all in one."[12] On another level, then, Gothic novels function as educational novels, teaching females how to act—how to repress their sexuality—in order to survive in a male-dominated culture where "action" can result in rape or murder. By underlining all the horrible things that can happen to women if they refuse to follow the orders of a patriarchal society, Gothic romances play on women's real fears and encourage women to be complicitous with a certain role defined by the dominant culture: the fate of the villainess is meant as a warning.

Mothers, the other important characters in Gothic romances, are often agents of education into the dominant ideology; the "mother functions as a cultural agent who transmits social mythology"[13] and, as such, may often be perceived as traitorous by the daughter. Gothic novels "help women come to terms with the mothers who . . . seem to be responsible for passing on this paranoia [about sexuality] to their daughters in a world ruled by men" (Modleski 19). Because the mother instills fear and disgust for the female body and because both mother and daughter possess female bodies, the daughter feels an ambivalence toward femaleness (Holland and Sherman 293) and a "profound resentment of the sources of [her] being, especially the female sources," which is articulated in the Gothic (Wilt 65). It is not coincidence that Gothic heroines are all on the verge of or just past puberty, for puberty signifies the beginning of a mysterious, frightening existence

as a woman and a corresponding fear and disgust of female bodily functions, such as menstruation and childbirth, which are passed down by a male-dominated culture whose lack of understanding of these processes inspires this fear and disgust and enforces, above all, strict silence on these topics. Mother substitutes, appearing frequently in the Gothic romance, are the means by which ambivalence toward mothers can be worked through without confronting mother-daughter relationships too openly (Modleski 68). Furthermore, the Gothic's resolution is partly a "more or less gradual understanding of the 'mother's' situation" (Modleski 68) and partly a justification of her actions.

In order to understand further the way in which Atwood uses Gothic conventions, it is necessary to trace the history of the Gothic romance through specific authors who are credited with establishing the Gothic as a genre. The Gothic romance gained popularity in the eighteenth century with Ann Radcliffe's novels, one of the most popular being The Italian, or, The Confessional of the Black Penitents, published in 1797.[14] According to Ellen Moers, Radcliffe was "the most popular and the best paid English novelist of the eighteenth century" (Moers 91). Radcliffe's novels set the standards for the Gothic tradition: they feature young, innocent heroines as helpless victims of complex murder plots. Radcliffe's heroines "who believed themselves to be so vulnerable always turned out to be invulnerable. Looking so defenceless, they were actually very manipulative of male power fantasies in order to protect themselves,

and despite their fears they remained untouched by the violence around them."[15] In The Italian, Ellena di Rosalba is an orphan of exceptional beauty, modesty (symbolized by her ever-present veil), morality, and artistry. However, Radcliffe's heroines' accomplishments and supposed ingenuity and intelligence are never of the slightest practical use; her heroines experience difficulty, they do not get out of it (Wolff 211). These qualities nonetheless draw the hero of The Italian, Vincento Vivaldi, to Ellena and prompt hi- proposal of marriage.

Edith Birkhead states that "Mrs. Radcliffe's heroes are distinguishable only by name."[16] Vivaldi, a young nobleman, is a typical Radcliffean hero who falls passionately in love with Ellena, who (naturally) does not actively seek his attention. Typically, "Radcliffe deflects sexual tension" (McMillan 53), but, in this case, onto the villain, not the hero. Usually the threat to the heroine is rape, which allows her to fear yet desire penetration, but in The Italian, Ellena is threatened with death, not with rape: sexuality is extremely repressed. Sexual magnetism is thus deflected not onto Vivaldi, who is relatively ineffectual, but onto the dynamic villain, Schedoni--a result that Radcliffe, in her efforts to create a believable villain, probably could not have foreseen.

Vivaldi's family is opposed to his marriage with Ellena because of Ellena's lack of social status and dowry--the typical Gothic concern with property. The heroine, who is supposed to go from an orphaned nobody to the rightful mistress--a somebody (Modleski 48)--without

actively pursuing her elevated status, must overcome the requisite obstacles before she can claim her rightful place. The obstacle to Ellena and Vivaldi's union is the Marquesa, Vivaldi's mother, who conspires with her confessor, Schedoni (the Italian of the title) to kill Ellena. Ellena is spirited away by Shedoni's henchmen to a convent ruled by an evil Abbess (a friend of the Marquesa's) and is forced to make a choice between an arranged marriage or taking the veil, both acts which would separate her and Vivaldi forever, but which, more importantly, would define her within the patriarchy in which she exists, as nun or wife. As it is, she is "free" from ownership (fatherless and husband-less) and therefore threatening to patriarchal property relations.

It is at the convent that Ellena meets Olivia, a nun, who ultimately turns out to be Ellena's real mother. Olivia planned her own death in order to escape Schedoni, her dead husband's brother (and Ellena's uncle), who forced Olivia to marry him by raping her. At the convent, Olivia lends her veil to Ellena, a significant act in terms of what this mother--agent of the patriarchy--is trying to teach Ellena: proper modesty and repressed sexuality. Olivia's story of victimization at the hands of her second husband, Schedoni, warns Ellena about what can happen to a single woman--a fatherless and husband-less woman--in this society. That Ellena refuses these choices--the arranged marriage or the veil of the Abbess--indicates her desire for space as a <u>woman</u>.

Ellena undergoes the requisite travelling that is a metaphor for

her increasing maturity. Radcliffe delights in elaborate journey sequences, a necessary device that removes the heroine from a familiar setting to an exotic, unknown one that is disorienting and terror-inspiring. Aside from viewing descriptive passages of landscape, usually from a window, Ellena is confined primarily to interiors: huge dark convents or mansions with dark winding passages and secret rooms and dungeons in which she is imprisoned. As Moers states, the Gothic castle is still indoors and therefore a freely female space (Moers 126); the indoor travel that takes place (i.e. travelling up and down long passages or dark stairways) is exclusive to the Gothic (Moers 128) and allows adventure without leaving the house (McMillan 52), the woman's space.

Vivaldi, however, is also kidnapped and imprisoned; Radcliffe's message here is that it is not only women who are trapped in a nightmare world of unforeseen, inexplicable threats and events; men are too. She thus denies that it is society's conception of female sexuality that, for women, turns the everyday world into a nightmarish one filled with numerous threats.

Eino Raillo, in his discussion of Ann Radcliffe's fiction, states that "after the publication of The Italian, [Radcliffe] remained altogether silent, partly, no doubt, because she had exhausted her own particular field of work."[17] My purpose in this thesis is to repudiate that claim by showing how Gothic conventions were (and still are) employed by innumerable authors following if not in Radcliffe's footsteps then at least down the path she blazed for them.

Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey (1818)[18] is a witty parody of the Gothic romance à la Radcliffe. Ellen Moers mentions in passing that Austen, in Northanger Abbey, points to the Gothic as a woman's self-conscious creation (Moers 126): Austen's lecture on the validity of the novel (Austen 57-9) reveals her understanding of it as a predominantly female form. Coral Ann Howells states that in this passage, "Austen is criticising the irresponsibility of those writers who trivialize Gothic's important insights into human behavior [and think it is used] merely to frighten little girls."[19]

Northanger Abbey contains what Judith Wilt calls the conventionalities of the genre: it mentions The Mysteries of Udolpho and other gothic romances; it contains the paradigmatic gothic setting and the isolated and tyrannical villain (General Tilney) as well as the ruined church (Northanger Abbey) and the over-imaginative heroine, Catherine Morland (Wilt 126)—although Henry Tilney is to blame for some of Catherine's fears because he plants the seeds of wild imaginings in her mind, on the way to Northanger Abbey. Henry is a typical Gothic hero of the Radcliffean mode; like Vivaldi, he plays a rather passive, at best rescuing, role. But Henry, hinting at the typical ambivalence of post-Radcliffean Gothic heroes, becomes a sort of Gothic villain too: he is a lover-mentor figure; he has a psychological advantage over Catherine (the strong over the weak), and, like his father, he uses it patriarchally (Wilt 146).

The heroine, Catherine Morland, lacks the gentrified, stereotypical upbringing of the typical gothic heroine: she prefers

"rolling down the green slope at back" to any other pursuits, a trait that is, states Wilt, "more an anticipation of Emily Brontë than an echo of" a Radcliffean heroine (Wilt 138), thus pointing to Austen's influence on the Brontës. Catherine is drawn to nature, as Ellena is,[20] but in a more physical way, not in the sterile, intellectual way Ellena regards the scenery in Italy. An unconventional Gothic heroine, Catherine is not particularly beautiful nor particularly talented in the "feminine accomplishments" of needlework, fashion, or sketching. Cynthia Griffin Wolff applauds Austen, however, stating that "the language of gothic fiction allows Austen to convey Catherine's normal seventeen-year-old appetites and emotions" (Wolff 216). Furthermore, Catherine's sexuality is not projected onto a male: Austen makes it explicit that Henry Tilney likes Catherine because she likes him and does not hide it. Austen thus refuses to articulate the contradiction of the conventional Gothic in which the heroine, while desiring a husband and the corresponding status, must absolutely never pursue these things (Modleski 48).

Catherine is taken in and used by Isabella and the other Thorpes, revealing her lack of judgement—uncharacteristic of a true Gothic heroine. "This terror of being used," states Wilt, "this sense of being coaxed down a dark path by an invisible hand, is pure Gothic" (Wilt 138). Although in Northanger Abbey this "pure Gothic" is applied to everyday concerns, Austen's statement is that woman's everyday existence is terrifying. Unlike Radcliffe's heroines, who always do the "right" thing (according to patriarchal ideals),

Catherine makes mistakes and is guilty of poor judgement; what distinguishes her from other Gothic heroines is the fact that her rage and humiliation turn into remorse and self-reproach, which generates self-examination and, finally, self-forgiveness and growth. Radcliffe's heroines, because they never do anything wrong, never feel self-reproach and so never complete the process that ends in personal growth (Wilt 136): they are always perfect to begin with.

The conventional journey motif is also present in Northanger Abbey: Catherine goes off to Bath, then off to visit the Tilneys at their home, Northanger Abbey--but she is always under someone's charge (Mrs. Allen; General Tilney); she is never left totally alone in the world as Radcliffe's heroines seem to be. In this instance, Mrs. Allen can be seen as an ineffectual mother: she does not guide Catherine properly through the maze of social propriety and etiquette, as shown when Catherine goes driving unchaperoned with John Thorpe but does not find out until later that it was imprudent to have done so. Catherine's own mother, while portrayed as ineffectual during Catherine's childhood (due to the demands of the younger children), is understanding and supportive of her daughter and, as such, is not an agent of the patriarchy that Catherine later comes to resent.

Marriage does not tie ends up neatly in this Gothic romance; rather, it seems contrived, artificial, unhappy. Female growth is allowed, but only within the limits of the patriarchal system. Catherine's humiliation by Henry (with regard to her wild imaginings) is a mere precursor to her humiliation by General Tilney (with regard

to her lack of wealth); in both cases, this humiliation is related to patriarchal power and how these men wield it. Judith Wilt states that General Tilney fits the criteria of a gothic villain: he is an egoist and a materialist (Wilt 145). The improbabilities of the Gothic in this novel become the probabilities of reality--and are therefore infinitely more horrifying. Catherine's fantasy about General Tilney keeping his wife prisoner points to her own fears about not being married--he will prevent it--and about being married--her husband may secretly be an ogre (Wilt 162). In this way Gothic fears are transformed into a recognizable anxiety of common life (Wilt 147), because General Tilney does have the power to prevent marriage and Henry Tilney does show suprising meanness in his teasing of Catherine. The Tilneys' tyranny is indicative of the very real power that the socially privileged hold over the lower classes; it is also indicative of the male-dominated culture in which Catherine lives. Eino Raillo states that Gothic ruins signify the decline of former power (Raillo 9); since Northanger Abbey is not in ruins but very well-kept, it signifies (ominously) that there is no decline in General Tilney's patriarchal power.

By setting her Gothic romance in England and by hinting at the possibility that both positive and negative traits exist within the human character, Austen grounds her novel in something closer to reality than Radcliffe's Gothic romances. Austen's crowning achievement in Northanger Abbey "is not to make romance ridiculous but to make common anxiety 'serious' or 'high'" (Wilt 126)--a trend

continued in popular Gothic romances today. This commonality is what distinguishes Austen--and, as we shall see, the Brontës--from Radcliffe.

Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights (1847)[21] deals more overtly with grounding the Gothic romance in reality and, in doing so, reveals the underpinnings of the Gothic tradition by taking them to their extremes. Set in England (and thus refuting Henry Tilney's claim that nothing remotely Gothic could happen there), Wuthering Heights is the story of two families, the Earnshaws and the Lintons, who live in isolation on the English moors. At the opening of the novel, Catherine, the heroine, is a motherless child. The closest she comes to having a mother-figure is in the character Nellie Dean, who is ultimately ineffectual. Catherine is neither of the two female stereotypes--the pure heroine or the evil femme fatale--that usually exist in Gothic romances. Instead, she possesses positive and negative traits of both: an excess of sensibility, independence of spirit, and cruelty; her mind is complicated, analytical, and uninhibited (Conger 96-99). Catherine is a radical heroine, choosing Heathcliff for her love, "a social outcast who pits himself against economic and conjugal privilege and whose implicit democratic and romantic values could alter the fabric of society" (Conger 98). In fact, as Conger argues further, Catherine is such a rebellious heroine that Emily Brontë has gone beyond gothic conventions, almost beyond the limits of the socially acceptable (Conger 99). Perhaps this is why Catherine dies in the middle of the novel. Radcliffe's heroine

Ellena is never even remotely attracted to the "demon-lover" character (Schedoni); Austen's heroine is attracted to a man who is slightly demonic (in his torture of her by teasing and patronising--a "threatening" lover, Wilt calls him [146]); in Wuthering Heights, at least, Catherine admits a pull in two directions, between the weak yet rich "hero" Edgar Linton and the dynamic but poor hero-villain Heathcliff (Conger 100), who embodies the extreme of the "threatening" lover.

Catherine's marriage to Edgar Linton, instead of resolving the complicated plot of secrets and misunderstandings, only exacerbates the situation. Edgar Linton, like the hero in Radcliffe's The Italian, whom Ann Ronald describes as "a comfortable, non-threatening, safely asexual man" (Ronald 182), seems to be an impotent non-entity. Perhaps this is why Catherine's pregnancy comes as such a shock: we cannot imagine her and Edgar actually consummating their marriage. Catherine's marriage to Edgar and her subsequent pregnancy thus carry strong implications of the power of social priviledge and patriarchal inheritance (namely, wealth and property) from which Edgar gains his attractiveness and potency. Edgar thus can never stand up to Heathcliff physically: it is only on the basis of his social standing that he has power over Heathcliff, and when Heathcliff gains his own property and wealth, Edgar is no match for him.

Catherine dies giving birth to her daughter Cathy, conveniently leaving her motherless in turn. Cathy also becomes a pawn between Edgar and Heathcliff, although as a means to property instead of an

object of Heathcliff's adoration. Cathy, raised by Nellie Dean (who is a more effective mother this time around, shown by the fact that Heathcliff must separate Cathy from her in order to dominate Cathy), becomes the heroine of this novel, and her cousin Hareton, raised by Heathcliff, becomes the hero, and the two are to be united in marriage at the conclusion. But Emily Brontë, in true subversive fashion, alters the balance of power in their relationship. While it is true that Hareton rightfully possesses the wealth and property (inherited from Heathcliff) that are necessary to the hero, it is Cathy who can read and write, and it is she who teaches this to Hareton; thus she gains a position of power nearly equal to his. Brontë's female "revenge" (a term used by Modleski [47]) on male dominance is to deny Hareton this power to read and write. For Emily Brontë, as for her sister, Charlotte, the Gothic resolution of marriage becomes a space for rebelling against stereotypes by subverting them. The Gothic thus evolves from Radcliffe's and Austen's use of it into an increasingly--although not yet overtly--feminist form.

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847)[22] and Villette (1853)[23] continue in the tradition begun by Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen, and Emily Brontë, but Charlotte, like the others, adds her own twists to the Gothic romance. Like Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre is set in commonplace England. Jane has the opportunity to journey to an exotic place (India) with St. John, but she refuses. The life of a missionary's wife, oppressed by both her husband and her religion, is not for Jane. This is not to say that the journey motif is less

important than in other Gothic novels, for Jane's journeys--often undertaken under her own inclination and locomotion--lend her the same occasions for self-examination and maturation. "Jane flees [Thornfield-Hall] not in order to be found, but to find herself, to achieve economic and moral independence" (Modleski 46).

Jane has no timid prudishness of a Radcliffean heroine and none of the morbid fears of death (Howells, 1978, 163)--actually fears of sexuality disguised as death because the two are so often conflated for women in a patriarchal society. Jane is sexually aware (Howells, 1978, 177) and she makes her decision to leave Rochester not out of ignorance and fear but out of a clear sense of her own informed morality. Like Heathcliff, Rochester is an ambivalent hero; Charlotte Brontë, states McMillan, was the first to combine the hero and the villain into a complex hero-villain that is now the norm in popular Gothics (McMillan 54), although Jane Austen and Emily Brontë had previously hinted at this possibility in Northanger Abbey and Wuthering Heights. Jane Eyre, like Wuthering Heights, concludes with the heroine's marriage to the hero-villain, although again he is in a slightly altered form, less "masculine" and suitably cowed by his maiming and blinding at Bertha's hands. Rochester is mutilated in the end, suggests Wolff, because he must appear as a "real" man with moderate passions (as opposed to a larger-than-life demon lover, such as Heathcliff) if Jane is to marry him (Wolff 221). Rochester's handicaps make him and Jane more nearly equal politically.[24] This convention is present in contemporary Gothics as well, especially in

Atwood's Lady Oracle. The hero's injuries reduce potential danger to the heroine.

As in The Italian, the veil in Jane Eyre is a "key symbol of disaster" (Howells, 1978, 174), for the veil plays a role in both interrupted marriage scenes: Bertha, Rochester's wife, tears Jane's veil in half; the nun's veil that Ellena has forgotten to remove causes her and Vivaldi to be imprisoned and questioned by the Inquisition. In Jane Eyre, "the madwoman in the attic also acts to prevent and then to bring about the marriage. When Jane's entrapment in the role of governess or of bride disturb her peace of mind, the madwoman acts out her fears" (McMillan 54). The imprisoned madwoman is a symbol of the heroine's own repressed rage that is not allowed expression by the heroine herself; she also represents the restrictions of the feminine role and acts as a warning against stepping outside of that feminine role (Modleski 72). But, ultimately, it is because of Bertha that Jane is able to marry Rochester; Bertha reduces Rochester's male potency with her literal and metaphorical "fire." When we learn that Bertha (supposedly a ghost) has actual existence and history, we go further into the realm of the Gothic, not away from it.[25] In this way, says Howells, "Brontë reshapes Gothic convention and fuses nightmare with fact to create an emotional reality of agony against which Radcliffean ideal terrors have no more substance than shadows" (Howells, 1978, 176). Brontë's undermining of the Gothic, Homans states, undermines itself by showing reality to be more horrifying than any fiction Jane could

offer about Grace Poole and her eerie laughter (Homans 260).

Charlotte Brontë's concern with female sexuality is also evident in her last novel, Villette (1853). The fire that breaks out at the theatre where Lucy and Dr. John are watching Vashti perform is, says Nina Auerbach, the "externalization" of Vashti's inner fire."[26] Auerbach does not, however, go far enough in her analysis: Vashti and her very public fire actually symbolize "Lucy's hidden revolt."[27] The audience, overwhelmed by the symbolic "flames," fearfully attempts to escape, thus revealing its deep-seated fears about female sexuality; furthermore, Dr. John knows how to "escape" the flames: as Lucy states, he gets them out of the hot, crowded theatre, outside into the cold air of "male" reason. His cold male logic douses Lucy's violent passions and points to the impossibility of any union between them. In Villette, as in Jane Eyre, fire is a symbolic tool used by women--Bertha and Vashti--to destroy, at least partially, male power.

Religion is foregrounded more in Villette than in Jane Eyre; as Wilt states,

> [t]he Church . . . is solid and massive, casting vivid shadows over the nation, an entity so weighty that it continually twists characters out of their personal orbits. As a result, the dread that is being exposed and explored in this fiction is fear of being crushed (Wilt 143),

crushed by the patriarchal oppression that the Church helps to perpetuate: religion is one more means for furthering male domination. Wilt also states that Lucy, instead of fainting dead away

at the sight of the ghostly nun, "tears the stuffed simulacrum apart"; thus Villette "is not parody nor imitation but transformation--a re-Gothicizing" (Wilt 115n). Religion, with its lack of roles for women aside from procreation, oppresses women, and the imprisoned nun is a symbol of that oppression. Lucy's tearing it apart, then, points to her fury and refusal to be oppressed. As in most Gothic romances, religion (especially Catholicism, to a Protestant) is cloaked in mystery; it is often perceived as a threat to the heroine: first to Ellena, trapped in the clutches of the evil Abbess, then to Jane, pressured to work in India as a missionary with St. John, and now to Lucy, encouraged by the priest to take the veil in Villette.

Like Catherine Earnshaw, Lucy Snowe is in love with two men, Dr. John and M. Emmanuel. There is no clearly defined hero and villain in this Gothic novel, however (shades of the popular romance), Lucy and M. Emmanuel must overcome initial dislike and misunderstanding. Villette is typical of all Gothic romances where, as has been previously mentioned, the heroes are impotent, asexual men or are rendered less masculine by the end of the novel. Here in Villette, Lucy "need never deal directly or realistically with an adult male, an adult relationship, or an adult world . . . marriage tantalizes her while consummation occurs only in dreams" (Ronald 185), a situation conveniently brought about by M. Emmanuel's (implied) death by shipwreck. Atwood herself states that "[t]he first really ambiguous ending is in Villette, where the reader is given a choice of two endings, one happy, one unhappy."[28] This seems a regression from

the seemingly more modern Jane Eyre, where Jane and Rochester not only have sex but also have children, all within the time frame of the novel. Brontë seemingly offers no resolution of women's fears about marriage and motherhood in a male-dominated society; she deflects them, using the Gothic "to disarm, even if only temporarily, actual dissatisfaction with the social institutions and forms legitimated by those conventions" (Radway, 1981, 140). But Charlotte Brontë refuses to concede that marriage is what affords a woman status and wealth: Lucy has her inheritance from Miss Marchmont (a matrilineal inheritance), her school to run, and her story to write; she is thus afforded an identity outside of conventional marriage--in fact, in Villette, marriage is ultimately unnecessary.

Atwood appropriates Gothic conventions employed by Radcliffe, Austen, and the Brontës and uses them as political weapons to criticize accepted stereotypes of and attitudes toward women in contemporary society. She continues what these authors have begun, but with a wider public, political emphasis. In her study of the Gothic and grotesque in Canadian fiction, Margot Northey sees Gothicism as "a response to the political and religious insecurity of disturbed times."[29] Similarly, Tania Modleski explicitly states that "the Gothic has been used . . . to connect the social with the psychological, the personal with the political" (Modleski 83). Thus, in bringing an overt political element into the Gothic ideology, Atwood makes the personal-political connection clear in ways that Radcliffe, Austen, and the Brontës do not: the Gothic world is the

world, as Atwood's most strongly Gothic novels illustrate. The power struggle of the modern Gothic has changed from a personal to a political one, and the heroines of Atwood's three Gothic novels--Lady Oracle, Bodily Harm, and The Handmaid's Tale--struggle against a pervasive patriarchal influence that tries to force upon them an identity that fits neatly within the dominant culture. The presence of many Gothic and romance conventions in these three novels leads the reader to expect certain conclusions, but Atwood in the end subverts these expectations, twisting the conventions of the Gothic as it has been set out by the novelists discussed above and as it is continued in the so-called "popular" Gothic romances of today: "the Gothic novel characteristically evokes rising horror over the disjuncture between the Gothic world created by the novel and the ordinary world ....[Atwood's fiction] evokes rising horror over the similarities between the two worlds" (Rosowski 199). My intent in this paper is to explore Margaret Atwood's contemporary use of the Gothic, tracing how it has evolved in her three most strongly Gothic novels: Lady Oracle (1976), Bodily Harm (1981), and The Handmaid's Tale (1985).

Lucy Freibert argues that "Atwood turns on end myths and fairy tales which have succoured and seduced women for ages . . . she satirizes novels, magazines, films, and cultural patterns which have served as escapes,"[30] but which have, in many ways, served to entrap women further in the ideals of a male-dominated culture. According to Linda Hutcheon, Atwood "refuses to allow either Canadians or women to deny their complicity in the power structures that may subject

them."[31] In her book Private and Fictional Words, Coral Ann Howells states that "Atwood is very aware of the stereotype images that women have of men as well as of themselves and of the kind of fictions through which such images are internalized" (Howells, 1987, 56); she goes on to say that Atwood's "Gothic" novels expose inconsistencies of popular forms in an "attempt to disengage from the fantasies they simultaneously enshrine and mask" (Howells, 1987, 55). Ultimately, she states, Atwood's fiction warns "against disabling female fantasies of innocence and victimization which displace women's recognition of the dangers of real life" (Howells, 1987, 62).

Lady Oracle,[32] Atwood's third published novel, is the most conventionally Gothic of the three Atwood novels to be discussed in this thesis. A "Costume Gothic" (a popular form of the Gothic genre) is written into the novel proper. Joan's Gothic romance appears in the novel proper at points when the anxiety about her own life threatens to overtake her; the suspense provided by the Gothic disguises the origin of her female anxiety and gives a plausible, different explanation for it (Radway, 1981, 158). The difficulty Joan has in writing her ending reveals hers--and Atwood's--difficulty in reconciling fictional experience with actual experience. The popular Gothic romance, in Janice Radway's terms, "symbolically represents female needs . . . and then depicts their successful satisfaction . . . [ratifying] or [confirming] the inevitability and desirability of the entire institutional [read 'patriarchal'] structure within which those needs are addressed" (Radway, 1987, 138). Lady Oracle, on

the other hand, embraces only to reject Gothic and romantic conventions. The threats Joan experiences--the phone calls, the notes attached to dead animals--are not neatly re-encapsulated in a "happy ending" where the orphaned "nobody"--Joan--becomes a "somebody" by marrying the hero and becoming mistress of his house. Recognition of the reasons why Joan writes "Costume Gothics," with all their connotations of disguises and different identities, is crucial to understanding Joan as a Gothic--and as an anti-Gothic--heroine.

In Bodily Harm (1981),[33] Atwood's fourth published novel, Gothic fantasy becomes Gothic reality. In Lady Oracle, Joan--and we--are allowed to retain some of the fantasies promised by the Gothic. In Bodily Harm, however, Atwood does not allow Rennie--or us--to sustain the romantic notions based on the Gothic. The dangers of buying into the Gothic ideology, merely implied in Lady Oracle, become explicit in Bodily Harm. Atwood has not yet come to see the Gothic as embodying specifically female concerns; rather, she regards it as dangerous for all those marginalized in a power-hungry, male-dominated culture. As Judith Wilt states, the Gothic is the genre most used by marginalized "others" such as women and foreigners (Wilt 101). Rennie, like Joan, undergoes the same repudiation of everything her mother and grandmother stand for in Griswold, but ultimately (unlike Joan), she must re-connect with her mother and grandmother instead of "letting them go." To her horror, she becomes her grandmother, searching for her lost hands in the sweater drawer of her bureau. But she also becomes her mother, able to grasp Lora's hands and give reassurance

that she, Lora, is alive, just as Rennie's mother grasps Rennie's grandmother's hands in a gesture of reassurance. Rennie's identification with her mother saves her, whereas, in Lady Oracle, Joan's rebellion against her mother is partly what leads her to embrace the Gothic.

In The Handmaid's Tale,[34] Atwood's sixth published novel, Gothic fantasy again becomes Gothic reality, but this time Atwood is relentless in her pursuit of Gothic fantasy as strictly a female trap. The conventional conclusion of the Gothic romance--hero rescues heroine--is reaffirmed in this novel, but the savagely ironic tone of the novel undercuts this ending, as do the "Historical Notes." Atwood abandons the possibility of breaking out of the Gothic ideology; instead, she reaffirms it in a bleak, pessimistic novel that is neither fantasy nor reality but a combination of the two that is more hopeless, it seems, than either is alone. Ultimately Atwood attempts to investigate the lure of the Gothic, and why Gothic romances appeal to women.

In an attempt to validate the romance-reading experience, Janice Radway states that the Gothic "must be termed at least mildly feminist because it provides the reader with the opportunity to express anger at patriarchal domination and to identify with a woman who does not fully adhere to conventional sex-role stereotypes" (Radway, 1981, 143). But, she concludes, the "feminist protest" of popular Gothic romances is not sustained (Radway, 1981, 160). Only in Atwood's hands has the Gothic become overtly feminist.

NOTES

[1] Judith Wilt, Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot, and Lawrence (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 3. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Wilt."

[2] Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1984 rpt. London: Verso, 1987), 84. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Radway, 1987."

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[4] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "The Radcliffean Gothic Model: A Form for Feminine Sexuality" in Juliann E. Fleenor, ed., The Female Gothic (Montreal: Eden Press Inc., 1983), 223. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Wolff."

[5] Ann McMillan, "The Transforming Eye: Lady Oracle and Gothic Tradition," in Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, eds. Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 52. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "McMillan."

[6] Ellen Moers, Literary Women (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 126. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Moers."

[7] Tania Modleski, Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982), 20. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Modleski."

[8] Kay J. Mussell, "Beautiful and Damned: The Sexual Woman in Gothic Fiction," Journal of Popular Culture 9(Summer 1975), 85.

[9] Ann Ronald, "Terror-Gothic: Nightmare and Dream" in Juliann E. Fleenor, ed., The Female Gothic (Montreal: Eden Press Inc., 1983), 183. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Ronald."

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[11] Janice Radway, "The Utopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Gothic Romances and 'Feminist' Protest," American Quarterly 33(1981),

158. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Radway, 1981."

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13 Susan J. Rosowski, "Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle: Fantasy and the Modern Gothic Novel," in Judith McCombs, ed., Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1988), 199. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Rosowski."

14 Ann Radcliffe, The Italian (1797 rpt. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).

15 Coral Ann Howells, Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970's and 1980's (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1987), 58. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Howells, 1987."

16 Edith Birkhead, The Tale of Terror (London: Constable and Co., 1921), 45.

17 Eino Raillo, The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism (London: Routledge, 1927), 5. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Raillo."

18 Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey (1818 rpt. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987). Subsequent page references will be cited in the test, preceded by "Austen."

19 Coral Ann Howells, Love, Mystery and Misery (London: Athlone, 1978), 115. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Howells, 1978."

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21 Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights (1847 rpt. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).

22 Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre (1847 rpt. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).

23 Charlotte Brontë, Villette (1853 rpt. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987).

[24] Karen F. Stein, "Monsters and Madwomen: Changing Female Gothic," in Juliann E. Fleenor, ed., The Female Gothic (Montreal: Eden Press Inc., 1983), 128.

[25] Margaret Homans, "Dreaming of Children: Literalization in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights" in Juliann E. Fleenor, ed., The Female Gothic (Montreal: Eden Press Inc., 1983), 260. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Homans."

[26] Nina Auerbach, Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 207.

[27] Mary Jacobus, "The Buried Letter: Feminism and Romanticism in Villette," in Mary Jacobus, ed., Women Writing and Writing About Women (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1979), 45.

[28] Kathryn VanSpanckeren, "An Interview With Margaret Atwood," in Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, eds., Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 220.

[29] Margot Northey, The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 110.

[30] Lucy M. Freibert, "The Artist as Picaro: The Revelation of Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle," Canadian Literature 92(Spring 1987), 23. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Freibert, 1987."

[31] Linda Hutcheon, The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988), 12. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Hutcheon."

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[33] Margaret Atwood, Bodily Harm (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1981 rpt. 1984).

[34] Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1985 rpt. 1986).

Chapter II: Gothic Aspirations: Lady Oracle

> [W]here else are women always central, always exciting, always thinking and talking their way out of difficulties? And where else do they have the chance at both the good man and the dance? And--most importantly--where else can women get everything they desire?[1]

Suzanne Juhasz's statement that "Austen's novels are models for women's romance fiction"[2] and Clara Thomas' observation that Joan Foster is a very similar heroine to Catherine Morland[3] point to Atwood's familiarity with the Gothic tradition as it is employed by Austen and others. The presence of the popular or "Costume Gothic" within Atwood's third published novel, Lady Oracle,[4] reveals Atwood's familiarity with the conventions of the "ideal" Gothic romance. Janice Radway argues that because "the ideal romance symbolically represents real female needs within the story and then depicts their successful satisfaction, it ratifies or confirms the inevitability and desireability of the entire institutional structure within which those needs are created and addressed."[5] Atwood certainly addresses this issue of women's unmet needs in Lady Oracle, but ultimately she refuses this ending, as, finally, does Joan.

"[S]tructurally [Lady Oracle] is a failed romance in which the heroine goes through all the motions that should lead to her

inevitable release, only to discover that the romance's promised return from the dream world never occurs."[6] Joan initially believes in the promises of the Gothic romance, including the blissful marriage at the end, but she becomes increasingly aware that while some aspects of the Gothic are applicable to real life—the threats, the fear—many other things are not. "Since Joan, following the Gothic pattern, believes that she can only escape by finding a hero-rescuer, her attempts leave her increasingly dependent upon the next man."[7] Joan finally realizes, however, that the "rules" of the Gothic do not govern real life, and through forging her own identity—telling her own story—she is eventually released from her total dependence on men.

Atwood places Lady Oracle firmly within the Gothic tradition by incorporating into the novel proper a "Costume Gothic," Stalked by Love, written by Joan Foster alias Louisa K. Delacourt. Joan's "Costume Gothics" outline for us the specific conventions of the genre. Most important in the Gothic novel, as Joan well knows, is the setting, the Gothic mansion. Even though the first eight pages of Stalked by Love (starring Charlotte, Redmond, and Felicia) are missing, Joan knows they will not be difficult to reconstruct:

> Charlotte would round the curve of the spacious lime-tree-bordered driveway in the Redmond carriage. . . . Then she would glimpse the Grange itself, with its feminine bulk and its masculine turrets and its air of pervasive evil. (28)

The first rule of any Gothic is to place the maiden in the hero's strange, frightening mansion; in this way she is sure to be

enthralled. Conventionally, as Joan knows, to be inside the hero-villain's house is to be in his power (29) because it is his territory: Schedoni kidnaps Ellena di Rosalba and imprisons her in his mansion; Catherine Morland travels to the Tilney residence; Northanger Abbey; Catherine Earnshaw's stay with the Lintons at Thrushcross Grange changes her irrevocably, "civilizing" her to the point where she desires the wealth and property that the Lintons possess; Jane Eyre lives in Rochester's manor, Thornfield-Hall--a place she must escape if she wishes to retain her independence. In Stalked By Love, Charlotte comes to live and work at Redmond Grange, a mansion which also comes complete with a mysterious maze in which "Many a young girl afore [Charlotte] [had] come to grief" (27). The maze represents the labyrinth of taboos and roles and morals that Charlotte must navigate in order to marry Redmond.

Joan is also well-versed in the conventions for the Gothic hero: his mask of the villain, his lack of consideration, his tone of derision, his attitude of aloofness, his aura of indifference (hiding deeper passions), his history of wild and melancholy ways. He is, without exception, dark and enigmatic, yet handsome; he possesses a hard and rapacious mouth, warm lips, an aquiline nose, and smouldering eyes. Sometimes his strong arms and the masculine width of his chest are described (how his cloak hung from broad shoulders, for example), but that is generally as far as his physical description goes: an innocent, unworldly heroine would not know about the rest of his body; nor, if she did know, would she be interested.

It is in creating these naive heroines that Joan excels: defiant, independent, plucky, attractive, yet modestly virginal orphans, forced to work in order to survive, their very lives threatened because they are alone in the world and must depend upon their chastity to protect them. Because they are the readers' stand-ins, the heroine's features are never clearly defined, "allowing the reader to reshape the face into her own, adding a little beauty" (31).

The emphasis on the appearance of the Gothic heroine--specifically her clothing--begins in Radcliffe's The Italian, where Ellena's veil plays a key role in defining Ellena's character and furthering the plot. Joan's heroines' clothing is always well-worn, yet neat, at the beginning of her novels (as opposed to the hero's clothing, which is always expensive and well-made). As Joan herself states, "Bad things always happened to the clothes of my heroines: bottles of ink got poured over them, holes were burned in them, they got thrown out of windows, shredded, ripped . . . stuffed . . . full of hay . . . floated down a river . . . buried in a cellar" (132). The heroine always ends up with a new wardrobe, usually bought for her by the hero. The emphasis on clothing in Joan's novels--indeed in most Gothics--shows that the heroine's change of clothes is equivalent to her change of status.[8] In wearing the clothes purchased by the hero, the heroine becomes symbolic property of the hero's. Jane Eyre understands this intuitively, which is why she resists Rochester's extravagant gifts before marriage. Clothing is the outward symbol of the property war that goes on between the heroine and her rival, a war

that the heroine always wins:

> [Charlotte's] sixth sense told her she would be awarded the prize, the prizes in fact, for in addition to Redmond she would get the emeralds, the family silver, deeds of land stowed away in attics, she would rearrange the furniture . . . and generally throw her weight around. (318)

Since the attainment of a rich husband in the Gothic novel is the sum of women's ambitions--the key to a socially-acceptable identity and to economic survival--then the "winning" of the hero through the symbolic war of clothing is indeed a victory for the heroine.

"The emphasis on clothes echoes [Joan's] own pre-occupation with appearance."[9] Clothing is as important to Joan in real life as it is in her novels: she describes in detail the way her mother and Aunt Lou dressed, as well as the way she herself dressed when she was at her peak weight. We know about Paul's cheap, shiny suits, Arthur's black turtleneck, the Royal Porcupine's cape and top-hat, and Fraser Buchanan's blazer with the leather elbow patches. For Joan, "clothes [are] symbols that [keep] people in their places . . . the return of Joan's old clothes symbolizes that there is no burying of the past" (Freibert, 1987, 30). While Joan's inability to get rid of the blue jeans and navy T-shirt that she "died" in symbolizes the impossibility of burying the past, it also symbolizes, I think, the futility of Joan's quest to lead a superficial existence based entirely upon appearances.

Joan aspires to be a Gothic heroine herself; she establishes early her desperate attempts to embody the stereotype:

> I'd always been fond of balconies. I felt that if I could only manage to stand on one long enough, the right one, wearing a long white trailing gown, preferably during the first quarter of the moon, something would happen: music would sound, a shape would appear below, sinuous and dark, and climb towards me, while I leaned fearfully, hopefully, gracefully, against the wrought-iron railing and quivered. (3-4)

She also wishes she could:

> cry with style, silently, the pearl-shaped tears rolling down [her] cheeks from wide luminous eyes, as on the covers of True Love comics, leaving no smears or streaks. (5-6)

Joan also documents her failure to embody this stereotype: she finds herself on an unromantic, eroding, concrete balcony with fifties-style geometric railings (4); furthermore, "When I cried," she says,

> I snorted, my eyes turned the color and shape of cooked tomatoes, my nose ran, I clenched my fists, I moaned, I was embarrassing, finally I was amusing, a figure of fun. (5-6)

To compensate for this, however, Joan makes the most of her green eyes, small white teeth, and long red hair. She dresses in long flowing gowns with dangly earrings and necklaces, reminiscent not of her heroines but of their rivals for the hero's affections, the villainesses (Felicia in particular). Ironically, the Redmond-Felicia-Otterly triangle closely resembles the Arthur-Joan-Royal

Porcupine triangle (Hutcheon 147), a fact that Joan does not comprehend until it is almost too late, that is, until she is almost trapped in the "maze" of deceit and disguise. Her unconscious identification with Felicia gradually becomes conscious as her empathy with Felicia increases; Joan realizes that she herself resembles Felicia more than she resembles Charlotte—who, it must be noted, is becoming less and less likable as Stalked By Love continues.

Changing clothes means changing identities, becoming someone else. Women in Gothic novels are never just one person, never completely unified. On the one hand is the pure, chaste heroine who passively submits to the masculine, domineering hero. On the other hand is the fiercely sexual villainess, the heroine's rival for the affections of the hero. There is never any question that the pure, chaste heroine will "win" the hero; as Kay Mussell remarks, "the passionate woman and her beauty and sexuality is always distasteful" because "passionate women corrupt the sanctioned institutions of [patriarchal] society through their failure to perform their proper domestic roles in controlling sexuality, inspiring the man to be 'good,' and nurturing the members of the family unit."[10] These revoltingly animalistic villainesses always demand sex and money and beautiful clothes. They are, naturally, no match for the heroine and her purity; consequently, the villainesses are conveniently imprisoned in asylums or, even better, accidentally killed due to their own carelessness: one possible ending of Stalked By Love has Felicia drown when the boat she and Otterly are fornicating in capsizes.

Joan's increasing sympathy toward Felicia is taboo because it shows that sexual women are human too—something that a male-dominated society tries to deny. Joan begins to realize that the sexual woman is actually a fragmented part of the heroine herself, a chunk of her intrinsic being that has splintered off in order for the heroine to fit into the role set out for her in patriarchal society.

Like the Gothic heroine she dreams of being, Joan herself is split into numerous superficial identities. She is both fat and thin, Louisa K. Delacourt and Joan Foster, an adultress and a dutiful wife, a trashy writer and a serious author. Joan strives to keep each of these identities separate, but she cannot understand at first that each of these superficial personae in fact make up the complex person that is <u>really</u> Joan. She inherited this ability to sustain, simultaneously, a number of potentially conflicting identities from her mother, whose double mouth and triple mirror set a precendent for Joan's own adulthood. Frances Delacourt[11] is an expert on conflicting messages, symbolized by her double mouth: "Her lips were thin but she made a larger mouth with lipstick over and around them, like Bette Davis, which gave her a curious double mouth, the real one showing through like a shadow" (65). She constantly contradicts herself, if not in words, then in actions: she tells three different stories about Joan's father; she says Aunt Lou is "bitter and frustrated because she didn't have a husband," but, as Joan says, "[Aunt Lou] seemed a lot less bitter and frustrated than my mother" (80). All her life Joan has received conflicting messages about

her father, about her mother's life, and about herself.

Aunt Lou herself is an example of a substitute mother figure in the typical Gothic. A mother's role in a Gothic novel is to teach her daughter about female sexuality: "good" mothers (in male-dominated culture) teach about repressing it, and "bad" mothers, like Mrs. Allen in Northanger Abbey, are indifferent to or even deficient in their duty of teaching sexual repression. Aunt Lou's job for a feminine hygiene company hints at a relationship between positive sexual maturation and the image of the "good" mother (Rubenstein, 1987, 88), a relationship that is often non-existent in traditional Gothics. On the other hand, the boys in Joan's class who snicker at "the curse" while reading "The Lady of Shallot" show the common reaction to women's sexuality in a male-dominated society in which female bodies are mysterious and frightening. Laughing at it is the only way for these boys to deal with menstruation.

When Joan begins to reduce drastically, her own mother, a negative influence, becomes increasingly distraught over Joan's emerging breasts and hips, pointing to her desire to repress Joan's sexuality. In fact, she goes so far as to stab Joan and draw blood, symbolically warning Joan of the consequences of challenging her (an agent of the patriarchy, in this case) by threatening to move out and assert her new maturity and independence.

Because of her weight, Joan's upbringing is light years away from the typical Gothic heroine's decorously obedient childhood. But her weight does not stop her from aspiring to the same goal that other

little girls are encouraged to aspire to, namely that of a prima ballerina. Joan's reason for idealizing ballet dancing is that "it was something girls could do" (39). Instead of dancing as a graceful butterfly, however, Joan is forced to play the part of a mothball. In her outrage, she stomps "a dance of rage and destruction" (47) in direct defiance of the mute acceptance of the typical Gothic heroine. Joan shows none of the "inner strength" and the "spiritual calm" that characterize the Gothic heroine—but she still gains the most attention. Yet she is not satisfied: dances of rage and destruction do not fit her ideal of femininity. Later she aspires to be an opera singer: "Even though they were fat they could wear extravagant costumes, nobody laughed at them, they were loved and praised" (76). But, as she states, "Unfortunately I couldn't sing," thus effectively ruling out that career choice.

Joan's fat, however, efficiently insulates her from the usual lessons of female fear that every girl must learn in order to take her proper place in the patriarchy. Joan's mother tries to teach her the golden rule of male-dominated society: "should I be caught, it would be my own doing" (50). As she reduces, Joan realizes that she has none of the proper fears of strange men; she "[has] to develop them artificially" (140). She must learn anew the lessons her mother tried to teach her: "Don't go there alone. Don't go out at night. Eyes front. Don't look, even if it interests you. Don't stop. Don't get out of the car. Keep going" (140). Atwood thus draws a connection between women's socialization in male-dominated society and

the sexually-repressive messages of the Gothic.

Joan's experiences in ballet class and Brownies are the basis for her dislike of female community and her distrust of female friendships. The other members of her ballet class "looked at [her], scorn on their painted lips; they were not taken in" by the "favor" that Joan is asked to perform (46). At school, good little girls never "hit each other or fought or rubbed snow in each other's faces" (53); they were not allowed the physical release of aggression that boys were. For girls, then,

> Words were not a prelude to war but the war itself, a devious, subterranean war that was unending because there were no decisive acts, no knockdown blows that could be delivered, no point at which you could say I give in. She who cried first was lost. (53)

It is not surprising then that Joan refuses to go to summer camp—"it meant being shut up for two months with a pack of sadistic overgrown Brownies, with no escape" (150)—and later resists her mother's attempts to send her to a private girls' school: "Ever since Brownies I'd been wary of any group composed entirely of women, especially women in uniforms" (85). As Joan begins to realize, many women "police" other women on behalf of the patriarchy; they are often quickest to react if one of their number should overstep the rigid boundaries of acceptable female appearance and behavior. This phenomenon becomes even more pronounced in The Handmaid's Tale. Ellen Moers, in her discussion of Wuthering Heights, hypothesizes that "the savagery of girlhood accounts in part for the persistence of the

Gothic mode in our own time,"[12] but she does not explain why; perhaps it is because the Gothic always pits female against female by having them compete for male attention--the grand prize. The socialization of females, furthermore, denies them any "unsuitable" human emotions, such as anger, as well as any positive ways of expressing it; girls thus must rely on devious, subterranean ways of expressing their rage and frustration.

Furthering the tradition begun by Radcliffe and the Brontës in The Italian, Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre, Lady Oracle contains its share of the supernatural, a characteristic that places it firmly within the Gothic tradition. In the Gothic, the supernatural provides convenience as well as terror and mystery. These unexplained events--Vivaldi's sightings of the monk, Lockwood's dreams, Heathcliff's visions, the voice of Rochester calling Jane back to him, the ghostly nun, Joan's "automatic writing"--are all part of the Gothic's appeal to its readers: they act to displace the female anger and fear that the Gothic automatically raises by making the reader think it is the suspense that is causing feelings of anxiety instead of her questions about her role in male-dominated society. Significantly, Joan writes her Gothic novel during times when the anxieties of real life threaten to overpower her. In Lady Oracle, Joan's automatic writing--her descent into the labyrinth of relationships--acts as a parallel to her Costume Gothics: Joan is unable to escape from either the mirror or the Gothic. She slowly learns that both are potentially entrapping, and subsequently vows never to attempt either again.

The male characters in Lady Oracle also qualify as typically Gothic creations. They are ambiguous; they are often heroes wearing the mask of the villain, or, more ominously, villains wearing the mask of the hero. Here Atwood picks up on the ambiguities of the Gothic that women actually feel in real life: are men tender or brutal? Are they lovers or killers? Unlike most girls, Joan becomes aware of this ambiguity at an early age through her experiences with "the daffodil man." She still cannot decide if the exhibitionist was indeed her rescuer or vice versa. To illustrate her dilemma, both men ("or are they the same man?") are described similarly: neither old nor young, with a tweed coat and a pipe (57, 60). Joan's propensity to divide characters into heroes and villains, also inherited from her mother and her comments about Joan's father, is illustrated: "Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?" (61). This doubt about men affects Joan's judgements of character into adulthood. Paul, the Polish Count, is a suave, European lover who rescues Joan when she falls off the bus, but he is also the insanely jealous "malicious little dwarf" (Mavis Quilp) who has a gun hidden in his bureau. Joan's father, insinuates her mother, was an assassin during the war; now he saves lives as an anaesthetist. Joan cannot resist suspecting him in her mother's death: was he a murderer or a restorer of life? Because men in Gothic romances are only ever heroes or villains, a man who is not a hero is a villain by default, and vice versa. Only in the men of the later Gothic romances is the hero/

villain conflated (Jane Eyre's Rochester and Wuthering Heights' Heathcliff): still, from this point on, only men are allowed to be composite, well-rounded characters; women, especially in popular Gothics, remain divided.

Arthur Foster, Joan's husband, also becomes "grey and multidimensional" (271), much to Joan's dismay. At first she projects onto him the trappings of the Gothic hero—his black turtleneck and his indifference that must, she thinks, mask some passionate side of his nature (197), a common myth of the Gothic. Joan decides that Arthur is her savior. Arthur's name is significant, states Roberta Rubenstein, because in fact Joan wants to become Arthur's "foster" child: she is totally dependent upon him to "rescue" her from the Polish Count (Rubenstein, 1987, 7). When he does not, of course, Joan takes things into her own hands. "Arthur" becomes Joan's "author" in that he "creates" her (Rubenstein, 1987, 7); she defines herself in relation to him, as any good Gothic heroine does with her hero. But Arthur fails in the role of hero: he lacks the sexual experience that, according to the old double standard, was allowed for men but not for women. Instead, it is Joan who is sexually experienced, thus twisting the convention of the true Gothic heroine's sexual innocence (171). It is also made clear in the novel that because she lacks a satisfactory sex life with Arthur—unheard of in the traditional Gothic (244)—Joan seeks out the Royal Porcupine. Once again she is playing a role, not of Charlotte but of Felicia, and, as a consequence, her understanding of Felicia increases.

Later on, however, Joan suspects Arthur of being a villain masked as the hero: she thinks he is making the anonymous phone calls and placing the dead animals on the doorstep (it always has to be either/or with Joan). Here Joan follows Tania Modleski's Gothic formula to the letter: love for the "hero" turns into fear that he may be harbouring murderous thoughts.[13] As a result, Joan plans her "suicide" and makes her escape.

Like Arthur, the Royal Porcupine starts out as a hero: he even has the requisite cloak and top-hat, plus a handle-bar moustache. With him Joan can live out her fantasies of waltzing to the Mantovani Strings in a lace tablecloth. However, the lace tablecloth soon loses its appeal and--an even bigger disappointment--when the Royal Porcupine removes his disguise, he does not become an evil-minded villain, but merely the innocuous Chuck Brewer with a chin like a junior accountant. Reality is slowly intruding upon Joan's fantasies. The Royal Porcupine no longer titillates her, mainly because he begins to ask her about Arthur and their married life; he becomes "grey and multidimensional and complicated" like the other males in Joan's life, thus making it difficult for her to categorize him as pure escape.

Out of the fiasco of this fantasy, however, the Polish Count returns like a knight in shining armour prepared to save Joan from a terrible fate. Paul regards Joan as a Gothic heroine: "Love was the pursuit of shadows, and I was a shadow for Paul, doomed to flee before him, evanescent as a cloud" (285). But Joan knows that his perception

of her is false and even selfish:

> He probably didn't want me at all, he wanted the adventure of kidnapping me from what he imagined to be a den of fanged and dangerous Communists, armed to the teeth with brain-suction devices and slaughterous rhetoric. . . . Once he had me he wouldn't know at all what to do with me. . . . I was not the same as my phantom. (285)

Paul has the phantom of Joan as Gothic-heroine-in-distress firmly planted in his mind; he refuses to see Joan in any other light because to do so would negate his role as rescuer.

In asserting her own reality, however, Joan is misleading herself as to the reality of the other men in her life: she refuses to believe that they too are not the same as their phantoms. Finally, however, the reporter finds her. He is the only man in the novel who actually starts out as a villain, as a faceless threat to Joan. Yet it is he, in the end, who becomes the catalyst for Joan's re-integration of self by providing her with what she has been seeking: a unified audience. Now she can tell her story ("with not too many lies") and be "herselves." "[T]he Gothic myth of beset womanhood is transformed into a celebration of the female imagination as Joan resurrects herselves into new stories" (McKinstry 68).

In keeping with Gothic convention (Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, and Villette), this hero is "mutilated" at the end: Joan strikes him with the Cinzanzo bottle, cutting his head and making stitches and a stay in the hospital necessary. "There's something about a man in a bandage," Joan states (345); something that makes him into a

perfect candidate for Gothic hero; something about a disabled hero that, in reality, evens out the balance of power between the hero and the heroine. In a roundabout way Joan and Atwood thus acknowledge the necessity of the tradition of disempowering the male, begun by Emily and Charlotte Brontë in Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre. "Women writers," Modleski states, "have always had their own ways of 'evening things up' between men and women, even when they seemed most fervently to embrace their subordinate status" (Modleski 16). Finally Joan feels she is on an even footing with someone.

Despite this obviously conventional ending, Joan manages to break out of—or at least question—the destructive role of the Gothic heroine. As Freibert states, Joan becomes both Charlotte and Felicia, heroine and villainess (Freibert, 1987, 26). The masquerades and disguises that have become Joan's defense against betrayal and isolation (Rubenstein, 1987, 87) have inadvertently led to extreme fragmentation of Joan's identity. She finally begins to resist this fragmentation, beginning with the role of female martyr that has been forced onto her: in Terremoto with Arthur, when they see the "breast goddess," she is coldly adamant in her refusal to succumb to martyrdom: "I wanted things, for myself," she states (255), another manifestation of her failure as a Gothic heroine.

Joan's difficulties with finishing her Gothic novel reveal her difficulties with reconciling fictional and actual experience. Implicitly, she questions what the genre is perpetuating: repression of female sexuality, acceptance of male indifference or even

brutality, and unrealistic expectations of character. By becoming sympathetic to Felicia, Joan resists the fragmentation that women are forced to undergo in order to please a male-dominated society that is threatened by a "whole" woman. The realization of her own fragmented self is symbolically revealed in the scene in the center of the maze at the end of Stalked By Love, where Felicia, her own fat self, and other selves are waiting for her: "But every man has more than one wife," they tell her. "Sometimes all at once, sometimes one at a time, sometimes ones he doesn't even know about" (342). Joan intuitively understands that the Gothic heroine's fiercely sexual rival is in fact an embodiment of the heroine's own sexuality, a sexuality which must be extinguished (either through death or imprisonment) before the heroine can marry the hero. Otherwise, the hero alone is insufficient to satisfy her rapacious sexual appetites (as Redmond is with Felicia and Arthur is with Joan)--a notion that is extremely threatening because of its "implications of an unleashed feminine sexuality capable of satisfying itself outside the structures of patriarchal domination that are still perpetuated most effectively through marriage" (Radway, 1987, 74). The Royal Porcupine, who knows about her infidelity, even attacks Joan, quoting the newspapers that call her "a threat" and "a challenge to the male ego" (270).

Since the novel ends "in the midst of an unfinished episode," states Freibert (we are uncertain about Joan's future in Toronto), it means that "Joan's role [and the role of all women] is still in evolutionary process and the oracle's riddle is yet to be untangled"

(Freibert, 1987, 42). This novel differs from Bodily Harm and The Handmaid's Tale because in Lady Oracle Atwood's protagonist has not truly absorbed the threat of the Gothic. Joan's parodic tale--and Atwood's parodic novel--are distancing devices that keep the true threat of the Gothic genre at bay. As Roberta Rubenstein states, "the comic surface belies the sober implications of the experience" (Rubenstein, 1987, 88). Joan does, however, become "ironically more correct than her readers initially supposed in her assumptions about the relationship between Gothic literature and life" (McKinstry 58) when she writes her book of poetry, Lady Oracle. She finally realizes that "[s]he cannot be both controlling author and victimized heroine, for those roles are not compatible" (McKinstry 60); once again, she resists the fragmented identity that is often forced upon women.

According to Robert Lecker,

> The relentless disruption of the romance modes and conventions creates, on the one hand, an amusing parody of the genre. But on a more serious level, the disruption of traditional romance structures provides an implicit comment on the contemporary impossibility of ever finding the final sense of identity and completion or the ultimate vision of happiness which, as Joan well realizes, is usually offered by romance.
> (Lecker 201)

Joan rejects the limited identity that the Gothic romance offers women; instead of being a wife or lover, defined only in relation to a man, she is herself: she hits the reporter with the Cinzanzo bottle, proving her ability to protect herself, if necessary, and also

revealing a side of herself that, to this point, had not been allowed to surface. "I suppose it's a case of not knowing your own strength," Joan states (344), not knowing her own strength as a woman. Ultimately, "the failure of the Gothic framework to support [Joan's] life discredits the Gothic as a solution to a woman's difficulties, even as Atwood's novel, by using the framework, appears to confirm it."[14] Joan, however, no longer needs the Gothic as a framework to support her life, although Atwood ends the novel somewhat ambiguously by having Joan become interested in the reporter and in writing science fiction. In Bodily Harm and The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood's discrediting of Gothic romance conventions continues--with more ominous results.

NOTES:

[1] Susan Jaret McKinstry, "Living Literally by the Pen: The Self-conceived and Self-deceiving Heroine in Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle," in Beatrice Mendez-Egle, ed., Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality (Edinburg, Texas: Pan American University Press, 1987), 67. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "McKinstry."

[2] Suzanne Juhasz, "Texts to Grow On: Reading Women's Fiction," Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 7:2 (Fall 1988), 257n. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Juhasz."

[3] Clara Thomas, "Lady Oracle: The Narrative of a Fool-Heroine," in Cathy and Arnold Davidson, eds. The Art of Margaret Atwood (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1981), 159.

[4] Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976 rpt. 1984). Unless otherwise indicated, all further page references cited in the text will refer to this edition.

[5] Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984 rpt. London: Verso, 1987), 138. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Radway, 1981."

[6] Robert Lecker, "Janus Through the Looking Glass: Margaret Atwood's First Three Novels," in Cathy and Arnold Davidson, eds., The Art of Margaret Atwood (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1981), 201. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Lecker."

[7] McMillan, Ann, "The Transforming Eye: Lady Oracle and Gothic Tradition," in Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, eds., Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 58. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "McMillan."

[8] Lucy M. Freibert, "The Artist as Picaro: The Revelation of Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle," Canadian Literature 92(Spring 1987), 30. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Freibert, 1987."

[9] Roberta Rubenstein, Boundaries of the Self: Gender, culture, fiction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 77. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Rubenstein, 1987."

[10] Kay Mussell, "Beautiful and Damned: The Sexual Woman in Gothic

Fiction," Journal of Popular Culture 9(Summer 1975), 87.

[11] Joan's mother has the same name--Frances--as Hindley's wife in Wuthering Heights; this, along with Joan's question, "Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?" (272), reveals Atwood's awareness of Gothic tradition and points to her purpose in parodying it in Lady Oracle.

[12] Ellen Moers, Literary Women (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 107.

[13] Tania Modleski, Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982), 60. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Modleski."

[14] Frank Davey, Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1984), 67.

Chapter III: Gothic Reality: Bodily Harm

> Obviously, the narrative plot [of Bodily Harm] emphasizes the possibility of rescue, specifically the rescue of a female character by a male character. An acceptable plot; a politicized romance; a story about victimized women, about strong men, about foreign places. A woman's story![1]

The above statement reveals how Bodily Harm (1981),[2] Atwood's fifth published novel, can be placed in the Gothic tradition, but Bodily Harm is Gothic with a political twist. In her study of the Gothic and grotesque in Canadian fiction, Margot Northey sees gothicism as "a response to the political and religious insecurity of disturbed times."[3] Similarly, Tania Modleski explicitly states that "the gothic has been used . . . to connect the social with the psychological, the personal with the political."[4] Thus, an explicitly political element is brought into the Gothic ideology, a political element that, implicit in Lady Oracle, becomes increasingly evident in Bodily Harm. Roberta Rubenstein states that "bodily harm and exploitation in one domain [private] are correspondingly resistered in the other [public]."[5] According to Linda Hutcheon, "Sexual politics are shown to have their direct analogue in national politics."[6] In Bodily Harm, argues Mary Kirtz, Atwood makes a

connection between "Rennie's body, invaded from within by cancer, . . . [and] the body politic, riddled by the malignancy of corruption."[7] Rennie's oppression occurs simultaneously in Canada (through market and social pressures) and in the Caribbean (through overt political oppression).[8] Linda Hutcheon goes on to state that Bodily Harm is "more overtly about human rights and politics than the others [novels]" (Hutcheon 153): the laughable "Resurgenites" of Lady Oracle become the "true"--and therefore infinitely more sinister--revolutionaries of Bodily Harm; Arthur, ineffectual and unheroic, is replaced by Paul, who is such an an effective subversive that Arthur seems ridiculous by contrast. Yet, significantly, both "heroes" fail to "rescue" the "heroines."

Lorna Irvine's astute summary of Bodily Harm, as it fits into the genre of women's popular fiction, firmly places this work next to Lady Oracle in a discussion of the evolution of Atwood's use of the Gothic. Life Before Man, Atwood's fourth published novel, could perhaps be thought of as the "realist" fiction that Joan once (accidentally) wrote, where the hero played billiards all the time and the heroine sat upstairs in her room, doing nothing: "That was probably the closest to social realism I ever came," Joan states in Lady Oracle (182). Where Joan makes a distinction between the genres of social realism and the Gothic, Atwood conflates them: the Gothic world is the real world, in Atwood's fiction.

Coral Ann Howells states that in Bodily Harm, Atwood is "rewriting traditional literary genres like the gothic romance"[9]: "Bodily Harm

for all its modern Toronto and Caribbean scenarios is traditional female gothic minimally transformed with its insistence on pervasive threats to the protagonist and her final incarceration, the dread of every gothic heroine" (Howells, 1987, 58). Like Lady Oracle, which is told from an apartment in Italy, the stories that make up the text of Bodily Harm "emerge from . . . [a] particular space" (Irvine 46)--in this case, the prison cell. Bodily Harm and Lady Oracle are typically Gothic, dealing with enclosures--apartments, hotel rooms, cellars, basement suites--and the female's fear of being imprisoned in these enclosures (Irvine 46). In Joan's case, stereotypical roles are her figurative prisons; in Rennie's case, her prison is literal.

The epigraph to Bodily Harm is a quote from John Berger's Ways of Seeing:

> A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her.

This statement explicitly and (as I hope to show) mistakenly links only the female body to bodily harm--that is, to marginalization, imprisonment, assault, and other forms of victimization. The rope on Rennie's bed, left by an unknown intruder, misleads the reader into thinking that this is a typical Gothic romance where sexual assault is the heroine's worst fear. "Although the stories told by Rennie superficially follow narrative logic and give the reader a [Gothic] plot, that plot is profoundly misleading" (Irvine 49). Rennie goes along with this Gothic plot at first, but her experiences make her see

that death, especially the deaths she witnesses, are infinitely worse. Repressed sexuality is not at the centre of this novel; rather, violence, and its roots in patriarchal culture, are what Atwood is concerned with here. Men are at risk too, but only certain kinds of marginalized men: "[w]omen are among [men's] victims, but so too are men, for they victimize themselves" (Hutcheon 153), as seen during the scene in the courtyard of the prison, where the phallic sword is used by Rennie's captors to draw symbolic blood from the male prisoners, and the phallic cattle prod is used symbolically to "rape" the deaf-mute man. According to Coral Ann Howells, "for most of the novel, Rennie is caught like any traditional Gothic heroine in a female victim fantasy where she sees all the men in her life as untrustworthy, threatening, or sadistic" (Howells, 1987, 61). Only when she sees that men are victims too is she able to break out of this fantasy.

Imprisoned in her cell, Rennie falls back on an imaginary Gothic romance plot in which the heroine—herself—is always rescued. Diana Brydon states that "in attempting to imagine an escape, [Rennie] constructs yet another hackneyed plot, in which jaded journalist becomes romantic reporter" (Brydon 183). The corresponding presence of many Gothic and romance conventions in Bodily Harm, such as Clue, for example, a "game" which "implies conjunction between play and torture, between fun and terror" (Irvine 53), leads the reader to expect a certain outcome, but Atwood in the end subverts convention, using the Gothic as a medium not to reify the dominant ideology, but

to question patriarchal assumption.

Rennie Wilford, like Joan Delacourt Foster, is an atypical Gothic heroine in that she is an experienced, mature woman, not one of the young virgins of Radcliffe's, Austen's, or the Brontës' fictions. Despite this, Atwood does address several Gothic conventions, one of which is the threat of rape. By forefronting the conventional Gothic sexuality in Bodily Harm, Atwood misleads the reader into thinking that, once again, the threat to the heroine will be sexual assault. The coiled rope on Rennie's bed, for example, and the implied threat of assault that open the novel, as well as the old man who chases Rennie down the deserted street on St. Antoine's, lull the reader into a Gothic-inspired anticipation of the event. Such things are expected to happen to the Gothic heroine. As it turns out, however, the coiled rope does not lead ultimately to rape, as we readers assumed, and, furthermore, the old man merely wants an innocent handshake. Because of these incidents, though, the reader tries to fit Rennie into a certain pre-conceived text, Gothic in nature. Combined with Rennie's affair with Paul and her initial experiences with Lora and the prison guards, these "typical" happenings convince the reader that things are heading in the correct Gothic direction.

This forefronting of sexuality is the reverse of Radcliffe's fiction, where sex is repressed at all costs. Atwood's emphasis on sexuality is misleading, however, because it is not Rennie's femaleness that is threatening but her ability to write, to appropriate the phallic pen--something that a patriarchal society

fears immensely because the female is able to appropriate what was previously a male power. Rennie, as a "sweet Canadian," doubts the existence of such things as political uprisings, but her writing still makes her dangerous because she will not stay silent. The government of St. Antoine fears Rennie not as a woman but as a person--one who, given the chance, will speak and write her experience. Atwood herself understands very well an oppressive government's desire to silence writers: "Powerlessness and silence go together; one of the first efforts made in any totalitarian takeover is to suppress the writers, the singers, the journalists, those who are the collective voice."[10] Once Rennie realizes why she is frightening to the regime, she understands why she is imprisoned and, furthermore, she gains the power to express herself--the power to write instead of being written: the power to tell her story.

Like Joan, Rennie is a writer of frivolous, "escapist" fiction. She starts out as a "serious" journalist, but no one else takes her seriously--that is, they do not want to hear her exposés on slum landlords (even in Canada, a so-called "free" country, silencing of journalists takes place, although much more subtly than on St. Antoine's). So, in order to make money and to fit into the dominant ideology, Rennie writes articles on boredom, hats with veils, and drain-chain jewelry ("serious chic"). She herself states she does "nothing heavy." For Rennie, as for Joan Foster, popular writing provides a shield, an escape from reality. But both become victims, in a sense, of their writing: it deludes them into thinking they are

"exempt," that they can avoid "massive involvement" through their escapism. The Polish Count, Joan's first lover in Lady Oracle, states that escape fiction should be an escape for the writer too, but in effect he is advocating exactly what Rennie has done (and what has therefore endangered her): she has made herself into a deaf-mute, refusing to hear and write what needs to be heard and written. As Diana Brydon states, "in part, [Rennie's] story depicts someone learning to write--to think--again" (Brydon 181).

In Bodily Harm, Atwood addresses "the harmful inscription of the female body that results from its confinement" (Irvine 50) in expectations, clothes, roles, prisons. Women in this novel are objects to be written and spoken, inscribed neatly into male texts. In fact, Dr. Daniel Lucma's advice to Rennie is, "Think of your life as a clean page. You can write whatever you like on it" (84). But Rennie is unable to "write herself"; she says to Jake, "Sometimes I feel like a blank sheet of paper. For you to doodle on" (105). She knows that "she was one of the things Jake was packaging" (104), but for a long time she was content to let him; after all, that is what the hero does to the heroine in Gothic romances, by buying her new clothes and changing her hairstyle. Rennie becomes Jake's symbolic property--that is, until her cancer makes him realize that he does not own and control her body.

Jake inscribed Rennie into his text in the form of the sexual games they played where Rennie was to pretend she was being raped. Rennie is inscribed into the male text of the two policemen, symbols

of patriarchal power in their impersonal uniforms (Rubenstein, 1987, 103): they assume that Rennie has not been keeping her sexuality in check and is therefore somehow responsible for the assault implied by the coiled rope left on her bed ("they know about single women"). Rennie knows she is also literally inscribed in the larger, less tangible text of the patriarchal state as she fantasizes about the papers she would be forced to sign in order to leave St. Antoine. Rennie inscribes herself in the texts of popular culture, texts which seem to perpetuate the dominant ideology, in the form of the glossy magazine pieces she writes on hats with veils and drain-chain jewelry.

Rennie's mastectomy, however, starts her on the way to escaping this object status. Once her scar and partially-missing breast make her an imperfect object of the male gaze, she can no longer be inscribed so easily into those previous male texts. She is no longer a "package" Jake wants to open up; he is as frightened at what is inside her as she is. Furthermore, Rennie's cancer is tangible evidence that Jake does not have complete control over Rennie's body. She and Jake stoop to competing over who deserves the most sympathy. Finally, he leaves her to find a "lady" who <u>will</u> fit into his personal text, one with no nasty surprises inside her. From this experience, Rennie knows that the police, when they see her scar and mutilated breast, will believe she does not bring men home. What Daniel, her doctor, cannot see is that Rennie <u>is</u> dying: the "she" who was a product of others' texts no longer fits them, and the resulting

disorientation, the resulting non-identity in male-dominated society is what finally forces Rennie to relinquish her status as object and become subject, something that Lora, the other major character in Bodily Harm, manages only for the few pages in which she tells her own story.

Lora thinks that, by having sex with the prison guards who desire her, she is putting herself in a position of power, a position that will enable her to bargain for information, but ultimately it becomes another means of victimization. Margaret Homans argues that to be a literal object of desire might seem to offer women their only access to power but, as we see, this "power" is illusory: to depend on it is "to abdicate from consciousness, to cease writing and speaking"[11]— as Lora literally does, losing consciousness after being brutally beaten. She tells no more stories. Ultimately, it means death, which is Lora's final fate, hinted at by her continued silence at the end of the novel. "It is not very far from theoretical to actual silencing, and the death of the mind follows on silence" (Homans 258).

Rennie, like Joan, finds herself actually living a Gothic romance, but a Gothic romance gone wrong (as in the real Lady Oracle, the collection of poetry that Joan publishes as Joan Foster): no one comes to save Rennie. The reporter in Lady Oracle, his bandage symbolizing that he is ready to accept the heroine as his equal, becomes the sinister bandaged man in bed in Rennie's dream—a symbol of torture and murder, perpetrated by a male-dominated society.

As with Lady Oracle, traditional Gothic heroes abound in Bodily

Harm. Of the four main male characters, three qualify for hero status. The fourth, Dr. Minnow, is effectively out of the competition because he is black (inter-racial relationships are never part of an "ideal" romance--besides, he is murdered). The first potential hero in the novel is Jake, the man Rennie once lived with. He is sexy and passionate, and he likes to blur the lines between consent and force; in other words, he likes Rennie to pretend she is being raped, to resist a little when making love--something every heroine in Joan's Costume Gothics did extremely well (including Joan herself, the first time she makes love with the Royal Porcupine): overcoming her resistance is a necessary part of the hero's domination of the heroine. Jake even has the rapacious smile (one of Joan's criteria for the Gothic hero), "flawless, except for the long canines" (15). Jake is the epitome of machismo (as Atwood intended him to be): he is older than Rennie; he is sexually experienced; he runs his own corporation (hence he has attained financial independence); he controls the relationship. Jake divides women into two categories--shiksas ("who have cunts") and mothers (who do not). While he does not exactly buy Rennie a new wardrobe (as Redmond does for Charlotte), Jake does try to make Rennie over into a suitable "lady" by redoing her apartment, deciding what she should cook, and suggesting what clothes and make-up she should wear in order to make the most of her "assets." In the end, however, he fails to "rescue" Rennie from her invisibility as an unmarried, mutilated woman; he cannot counteract the disappearing act that she is undergoing, the disappearing act that

began with her partial mastectomy (Brydon 182). Ironically, Rennie's mastectomy changes the balance of power in her relationship with Jake. No longer can he dominate her; she is "one of the walking wounded" and therefore not "up" to Jake's competitive nature. Now it is she who needs--and worse, deserves--all the attention, which Jake, the insecure, immature man that he is, cannot cope with. Rennie's cancer is part of the "package"--a part that he has no control over.

A second candidate for Gothic hero is Daniel, Rennie's surgeon. Most importantly, Daniel is a doctor, the man of every woman's dream because of his financial security, his compassion, and his surgeon's strong, sensitive hands. Bodily Harm begins to take on some aspects of the "nurse novels" that the Polish Count wrote in Lady Oracle (even though Rennie is not a nurse). Unfortunately, Daniel is not very attractive in heroic terms, and, more importantly, he is married, and no convenient catastrophe befalls his wife in order to leave him free to marry Rennie. In fact, his wife in no way resembles the popular romance villainess that she is supposed to be so that her eventual demise can be justified. Instead, Rennie finally realizes one basic premise underlying "ideal" Gothic romances: the hero (in this case Daniel) needs her (Rennie, the heroine) to be dependent upon him; otherwise, it is no compliment to his masculine ego to dominate and subjugate and finally marry her--the ultimate act of patriarchal possession. Like Jake, Daniel fails in the heroic department: Rennie is left in jail. In fact, Daniel is complicitous with his failure: it is he who, instead of fortifying Rennie's identity, makes it begin

to disappear by performing surgery on her, cutting out a part of her (even though it is supposed to "cure" her). As Diana Brydon argues, Rennie's operation begins her disappearance; her imprisonment completes it (Brydon 182).

A third candidate for Gothic hero is Paul. He is boyishly handsome and unmistakably macho: his gun, boats, and jeep all prove his masculinity. He has a telescope, revealing a furtive kind of power--the power of the voyeur, to see without being seen. He comes the closest to "rescuing" Rennie: he is the first man she successfully has sex with after her operation. He touches her: "she can still be touched" and therefore rescued, she thinks (204). In fact, Paul even "duels" the "villain," Marsdon, for Rennie's freedom and manages to get her away from St. Agathe and back to St. Antoine, where (supposedly) she can catch the plane home. She--and we--mistakenly think that she is safe. Later, however, when Rennie is in prison fantasizing about her rescue, she hints that Paul's boat was blown up--with Paul on it. Once again a male character has failed to live up to his heroic role, the role that Rennie, as Gothic heroine, was so sure of. Rennie ultimately finds that Paul's "touch" is really not rescue after all, nor is Jake's, nor is Daniel's. All the men in Rennie's life abandon her in some way or another: her father left, her grandfather was senile, Jake left her, Daniel cut her up, Paul either died (Rennie strongly hints this) or left her, and Dr. Minnow died too. "The identity of that 'faceless stranger' [of Rennie's dreams] broadens to suggest not only several actual men in Rennie's

life but also a particular attitude toward experience" (Rubenstein, 1987, 104), the experience she has had at the hands of every man she has ever known. The only person left is Lora. Atwood thus puts forward the idea that it is female bonding that will--and does--save this heroine: clasping Lora's hand, Rennie pulls herself through "the invisible hole," into life.

Rennie finally questions her role as uninvolved tourist, as passive victim. Powerlessness equals invisibility, although Rennie at first thinks that powerlessness is camouflage (Brydon 182). She realizes that "no one is exempt" and that it is impossible to avoid "massive involvement." "'Massive involvement' comes to mean not the cancer that will kill Rennie but the connections with others that will save her" (Rubenstein, 1987, 110). The more massively one is involved, the more pain one must feel (i.e. Rennie's entire breast would have been removed if there had been "massive involvement," Daniel tells her). But pain also means a cure of sorts, a kind of purging. The pain and humilation and terror Rennie feels in prison are what finally "cure" her, what allow her to become massively involved with Lora, with another human being, regardless of the consequences. The invisible hand Rennie feels in her own is not Daniel's, as she used to feel it after their intense luncheons, but Lora's, after Lora has died in prison. Mentally and emotionally, Rennie has rescued <u>herself</u>--a triumph for a Gothic heroine. But physically she is still imprisoned. The "dreadful irony" of <u>Bodily Harm</u>, states Coral Ann Howells,

> is that maybe Rennie will never have the chance to enact her new story about not being a victim, because the power struggle has now expanded from a personal to an impersonal political struggle where oppression and victimization have no sexual focus; dictatorships whether colonial or post-colonial do not distinguish between women and men, and she is still in prison. (Howells, 1987, 61)

Rennie fantasizes her return to Toronto, signalled in the text by the constant shifting of verb tenses between past, present, and future (Howells, 1987, 60). The two most important statements in this novel in terms of placing the text in space and time are: "This is how I got here, says Rennie" (11), and "This is what will happen" (293). Lorna Irvine explains these statements: "In the novel there is only one space, and the only protection against insanity is the creation of stories"; thus, "the stories that make up the text emerge from the cell's particular space" (Irvine 46). Rennie, then, is the narrator of Bodily Harm; it is her story--and Lora's--she is telling. But instead of being entirely in the first person, the novel shifts between perspectives, between third-person and first-person narration, a device described by John Berger as distinctly female: "From earliest childhood [woman] has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually"[12]--another hint that Rennie is narrating her "new story." But while Rennie may never have the chance to enact her "new story," WE have learned the same lessons she has, and we still have a chance to enact a new story.

Rennie is never saved by a knight in shining armour. The lessons of her upbringing and of popular Gothics have failed her--all but

one. It is her mother who teaches her to reach out, to touch another human being, to literally lay her hands upon someone to form the bond that would save her. It is her mother who holds on to her grandmother's "lost" hands, and, when Rennie finally remembers this, she is able to grasp Lora's hand and pull herself, if not Lora, through the invisible hole in the air, into existence and out of the invisibility that she has surrounded herself with all her life.

Bodily Harm, like Lady Oracle, is a failed romance: Rennie, the heroine, does not achieve identity through marriage to the hero; in fact, she is left to rot in a Caribbean prison. Rennie's condition--imprisoned body, free mind--is purely Gothic; Rennie thus lives up to the conventional heroinism allowed women in the Gothic romance. But Rennie has established her own identity in a different way, through her bond with another woman, something that neither Joan nor Offred, the narrator of The Handmaid's Tale, achieve. Rennie is truly a subversive because she refuses the male-dominated society's parameters of identity for females and instead forges her own, without the benefit of marriage (a patriarchal institution). Linda Hutcheon states that Bodily Harm explores "the relationship . . . between a woman's need for connection with others and her equally strong need for freedom and independence" (Hutcheon 204), but, in Bodily Harm, Atwood strongly argues that connection is in fact freedom: Rennie is freed by her connection with Lora--not by her connection with a man. Rennie's "self-rescue" is a threat to male-dominated society because it is effected purely in the presence of females: no men are needed.

She and Lora are the typical fragments of the Gothic heroine and the sexual rival; here, in Bodily Harm, they merge their identities and become one. "[Atwood] finally perceives the female character as unified" (Irvine 39).

In Atwood's hands, the Gothic becomes overtly feminist in its concerns about power—who has it and who does not, and what happens to those who do not. For those people marginalized by the dominant culture, storytelling is a way of gaining power: it implies the possibility of being heard. "Rennie suggests a new story that can be constructed from the ashes of the old [patriarchal] one" (Irvine 39). Storytelling is thus a necessity for women, a fact Atwood also makes evident in The Handmaid's Tale, where another marginalized woman finds the courage to tell her own story. Like Rennie's, Offred's story is a type of "prison narrative": it originates from the room in which she is hiding. Atwood's message is, essentially, that marginalized people—whether male or female—necessarily tell their stories from a confined space; Lady Oracle, Bodily Harm, and The Handmaid's Tale, then, are "prison narratives with female subjects for whom marginality has become a condition of being," and, furthermore, Atwood's choice of the Gothic genre as the medium for Joan's, Rennie's, and Offred's stories is extremely fitting, for the Gothic romance is the traditional genre for this (Howells, 1987, 57). Bodily Harm, "[w]hile it bleakly confirms female dreads, . . . also exposes the damaging falsities of traditional gothic" (Howells, 1987, 58) and illustrates the triumph of a woman who, although she remains physically

imprisoned, finally renounces, on an emotional, intellectual level, "the passivity that permits the victimization and also the evasion offered by fantasy, and opts for life and responsibility" (Hutcheon 152)—a lesson that we readers, like Rennie, cannot escape.

NOTES:

[1] Lorna Irvine, Sub/version (Toronto: ECW Press, 1986), 41. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Irvine."

[2] Margaret Atwood, Bodily Harm (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981 rpt. 1984). Unless otherwise indicated, all further page references cited in the text will refer to this edition.

[3] Margot Northey, The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 110.

[4] Tania Modleski, Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982), 83.

[5] Roberta Rubenstein, Boundaries of the Self: Gender, culture, fiction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 101. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Rubenstein, 1987."

[6] Linda Hutcheon, The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988), 153. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Hutcheon."

[7] Mary K. Kirtz, "The Thematic Imperative: Didactic Characterization in Bodily Harm," in Beatrice Mendez-Egle, ed., Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality (Edinburg, Texas: Pan American University,1987), 118. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Kirtz."

[8] Diana Brydon, "Caribbean Revolution and Literary Convention," Canadian Literature 95(Winter 1982), 182. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Brydon."

[9] Coral Ann Howells, Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970's and 1980's (London: Methuen, 1987), 54. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Howells, 1987."

[10] Margaret Atwood, "Amnesty International: An Address" in Second Words: Selected Critical Prose (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1982), 396.

[11] Margaret Homans, "Dreaming of Children: Literalization in Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre" in Juliann E. Fleenor, ed., The Female Gothic (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983), 258. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Homans."

[12] As quoted by Irvine, 42. This shift in perspective is also most evident in Atwood's first novel, The Edible Woman (1969), where the first and last sections are told in the first person and the middle section (where Marian's crisis reaches its peak) is told in the third person, symbolizing Marian's consciousness of herself as an object of others' gazes.

Chapter IV: The "Female" Gothic: The Handmaid's Tale

> . . . I won't write any more Costume Gothics, though; I think they were bad for me. But maybe I'll try some science fiction. The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for you.
>
> —Joan Foster, Lady Oracle (345)

In The Handmaid's Tale,[1] Atwood's sixth published novel, we see that the future is not "better for you." The "Costume Gothic" genre takes on new meaning in this novel, where women are determined absolutely by the clothes they wear: blue gown, red habit, green shift, playboy bunny suit. Still, The Handmaid's Tale, like Bodily Harm, is more political than Lady Oracle: Linda Hutcheon, in her study of the Canadian postmodern, calls it "an overtly political fable."[2] Lucy Freibert agrees, saying this novel is "boldly political and darkly comic," and asserting that it is "more overtly political than [Atwood's] previous work."[3] But, unlike Bodily Harm, The Handmaid's Tale draws connections between "female" and "Gothic" that Atwood has not articulated before. In The Handmaid's Tale, argues Coral Ann Howells, Atwood is more concerned with gender politics than ever before,[4] and Roberta Rubenstein maintains that the narrator's imprisonment is "dictated by the unique, and vulnerable, attributes of the female body": in Gilead, "sexual

exploitation [masquerades] as religious fervor and worship of procreation."[5] Up to this point, Atwood has avoided the purely female political connotations of the Gothic--an omission she remedies in The Handmaid's Tale.

In many ways, The Handmaid's Tale is a revision of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, one of the "core" Gothic texts mentioned in the introduction. Offred, like Bertha Rochester, is imprisoned in an upstairs room where Cora, a "Martha," brings her meals. She is clothed in a red dress; she is imprisoned because of her femaleness--just as Bertha is imprisoned because of her insanity, a particularly female condition (hysteria) inherited from her mother. On a wider scale, imprisonment is a result of a male-dominated society's horror at female sexuality. Enclosures signify chastity, symbolically enforced in these two novels where Bertha's vicious sexuality is revealed on Jane's and Rochester's wedding day and where Offred's rebellion takes the form of illicit sex that is punishable by death. Like Bertha, Offred has lapses in consciousness that she fears may be the onset of insanity, but Offred can remember who she is, what day it is, and what she is doing there. Similarly, the changing of both women's names to a patronymic--Bertha became "Mrs. Rochester" as Offred became "Offred"--is part of the stripping of identity that makes inhumane treatment of these women possible: they have become possessions, the equivalent of an "it," in Offred's terms (180, 263), giving new meaning to the patriarchy's "ownership" of property--in this case, female sexuality. In addition, both women have pyro-

maniacal tendencies. Bertha finally succeeds in setting fire to Thornfield-Hall, and Offred fantasizes about starting a fire: "I could burn the house down. Such a fine thought, it makes me shiver" (196). Offred thinks a fire could be "an event, a signal of some kind to mark [her] exit" (273)--as the spectacular fire at Thornfield marked Bertha's. Significantly, Bertha's fire destroys Thornfield-Hall, the bastion of Rochester's male power. Since Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and Villette, where the actress Vashti's passion sets off the flames that are also externalizations of Lucy's passion, setting a fire has become a symbolic gesture refuting the power of patriarchy over women and other marginalized groups.

The Commander, however, wants Offred to be a Jane, not a Bertha. He sets her up as his mistress, gives her gifts, and wants her to play the spritely role of a precocious child--exactly the role Rochester wished of Jane Eyre. He wants her life to be "bearable," as if that would excuse him from the guilt he feels over the role he played in her imprisonment. But Atwood's novel differs from Brontë's, as Atwood uses Jane Eyre as a starting point for satirizing the Gothic.

The novel's second epigraph, from Swift's "A Modest Proposal," hints at the mordant satire that is present in this novel and that is continued, more blatantly, in the epilogue, the section entitled "Historical Notes," where a sexist Professor John Darcy Pieixoto freely discourses on the triviality of women's history and shows, shockingly, that the lessons of Gilead have been ignored: the (male) academic tradition of ignoring and trivializing women's stories still

continues into the twenty-second century. Both these works (Swift's and Atwood's) possess a similar ironic tone and contain just enough plausibility to make what they propose extremely frightening because there is nothing "new" in either of the societies proposed by these authors (Howells, 1987, 63): both are conceivable extremes of contemporary trends. Atwood herself states that everything that happens in The Handmaid's Tale has a precedent or, worse, has already happened in contemporary society.[6] Thus, despite Atwood's cue that this novel is satiric, The Handmaid's Tale, like all Gothic fiction, possesses an ominous basis in reality.

Like Joan in Lady Oracle and Rennie in Bodily Harm, Offred is not a typical Gothic heroine. She has been married; she has had a child (hence her status as handmaid). Unlike Joan's mother, Offred's mother is not "repressively patriarchal" (Rubenstein, 1987, 84), but Offred still feels pressure to live up to her mother's expectations, thereby justifying her mother's existence. Offred's mother is, therefore, almost as narrow in her beliefs as a repressively patriarchal mother. Still, Offred's upbringing is much like Joan's and Rennie's. All three absorb the lessons that Atwood makes explicit in The Handmaid's Tale: "the rules that every woman knew" (24), the little rituals women did "like prayers . . . hoping they would save you" (212): not going out alone at night, locking your doors, etc. Offred's upbringing (like many women's) is full of paradoxes: Offred burnt pornography in the park with her mother (36), but she also read the newspaper stories of sexual assault and dismemberment that happened to

"other women" (53) and she thus learnt how to blame the victim, remembered during Janine's testifying (67) and reflected in Offred's own attitude at her dismissal from her job--"What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?" (166). Despite a "feminist" upbringing, Offred has absorbed the lessons of a patriarchal society: if women are anything but passive, then they are to blame for whatever befalls them. The "radical" feminism displayed by Offred's mother and her friends is not enough to liberate women, Atwood seems to imply.

In this novel the Gothic takes on literal educational connotations with the presence of the "Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre," where women learn to be "real" women--to walk with their heads bowed, to keep silent, to be pious--ironically, nothing much different from what they had already learned. The stint at the Rachel and Leah Center is a second "upbringing," in a sense, for Offred and the other women: their previous lessons are simply taken to their logical, if extreme, conclusions. They are shown pornographic films as examples of the depravity and brutality exhibited toward women. The message given by the Aunts is meaningless, however, when the existence of the "club" where the Commander takes Offred is revealed, and the regime, with its hangings and Salvagings, is shown to be equally--if not more--brutal.

Despite its atypical Gothic heroine, The Handmaid's Tale does contain the Gothic conventions that lead the reader to certain expectations usually fulfilled by the Gothic genre. For example, the Commander begins to take on aspects of the typical Gothic hero, as

defined by Joanna Russ: he is a "Super-Male," older and more experienced than the heroine; in addition, he is in a position of power, where he can control the heroine.[7] But the Commander's wife, Serena Joy, however well she may fit the role of female villain, does not conveniently die in order to leave the Commander free to marry Offred, because in this Gothic romance, marriage is not necessary: Offred already has the Commander's name, a mark of his claim on her--indeed, of his possession of her.

The usual sequence of the "ideal" Gothic (as explained by Tania Modleski), where love-turns-to-fear-turns-back-to-love,[8] is reversed in The Handmaid's Tale: the narrator's fear of the Commander turns, if not into love, then at least into a certain trust ("something more complex" than love, states Offred). As the meaning of Nolite te bastardes carborundorum--"Don't let the bastards grind you down"--becomes clear to Offred, however, her trust turns back to fear and, increasingly, to horror at the way, as Modleski puts it, the past seems to be repeating itself through her (Modleski 69). Offred's identification with her (literal) predecessor--her "mother," in one sense--causes Offred to be caught up in a sequence of events similar to those that culminated in suicide for this "mother," the handmaid before her. Even Serena Joy berates her: "Just like the other one. A slut. You'll end up the same" (269)--an ominous statement leading the reader to wonder exactly what Serena Joy's role was in the "suicide" of the previous handmaid. Sensing this, Offred attempts to deny the ties she feels with the previous handmaid, but she finally

acknowledges them in the end, referring to the former Offred as "my predecessor" (91) and "my ancestress" (274). Like Rennie, Offred accepts her literal and metaphorical mothers.

The one thing that ultimately keeps this second Offred from "ending up the same" as her predecessor is not the reassurance that the Commander--the "father/lover," the usual hero of the typical Gothic romance--is not guilty of the crimes perpetrated by the new regime (Modleski 74). Instead, it is the pity that Offred comes to feel for the Commander, and for Serena Joy, as she finally realizes that they are also victims of the patriarchal state they helped to create. Forgiveness saves this current Offred from certain self-destruction. Through this forgiveness which, along with love and trust, Howells decribes as an alternative form of power (Howells, 1987, 68), and which the former Offred (so intent on being a victim) never felt, Offred can cut the destructive "ancestral" ties to the previous handmaid and thus keep from continuing the chain of events that once culminated in suicide, while still guarding her connections to and sympathy for her predecessor.

The second candidate for Gothic hero is Offred's husband Luke. Offred stubbornly persists in thinking that Luke may yet rescue her, but she also believes that he is dead, that he is in prison, and that he has escaped:

> I believe in . . . all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it. (100)

When she catches herself thinking of Luke in the past tense, however, she rebukes herself: in order to survive, in order to sustain her Gothic fantsies of rescue, she needs to assume he is alive.

Although Luke was a "liberated" man—he did the cooking, for example—he quickly warmed to his new role as protector when the first of the new regime's crackdowns began and Offred lost the ability to make purchases, access to her money, and finally her job. She feels Luke is patronizing her: "You know I'll always take care of you," he says to her (168). After this, Offred is unable to make love with him because of the inferior position she feels herself to be in: ". . . something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken . . ." (171). Atwood thus questions the popular romantic tradition which demands the heroine's completele dependence on the hero. With Luke, Offred is allowed none of the power-recuperating gestures that the Brontës, by subverting Gothic convention, allowed their heroines.

This need to protect, to feel needed because of superior strength and power, to be the rescuer is, it seems, part of every Gothic hero's emotional constitution—including Nick's. Of the three central male characters in this novel, Nick fits the physical criteria for hero best: he is foreign-looking (French); he is very sexy and forward; he is in a position more powerful than Offred's. It is Nick who says, "No romance," which Offred chooses to interpret as "No heroics"; in reality, however, it still means, "Do not become too involved"—something men said when they just wanted sex. Ironically, however, it is Nick who "rescues" Offred, for, as Professor Pieixoto points out,

the existence of Offred's taped story seems to signify that Nick's engineering resulted in her successful escape. Yet the "epilogue," usually the section of the Gothic romance that details the happily-ever-after marriage between the hero and heroine (with offspring as evidence) is misleading: there is no happy reunion with Nick, only a pompous treatise by a pedantic academic. The Handmaid's Tale is very far from the ideal Gothic at this point; thus, it reveals the Gothic's shortcomings by denying any sort of "re-encapsulation" of the questions and problems it raises.

Another aspect of the Gothic mode Atwood deals with is that of patriarchal inheritance. An example of the ominousness of patriarchal inheritance is present in The Italian, where Ellena, through the laws of inheritance, will herself become the Marchesa one day. In Wuthering Heights, the laws of inheritance force Catherine to embrace the patriarchal understanding of wealth as the only means to power, and subsequently force her to sacrifice herself in marriage to Edgar Linton to attain it. These same laws of inheritance consequently deny her any autonomy. In The Handmaid's Tale, where woman is merely vessel for man's seed, motherhood becomes a patriarchal inheritance. Woman's worth is inestimable on the one hand because of her role in procreation, but as an individual in this male-dominated society, she is, on the other hand, practically worthless. Women are allowed few creative outlets in this novel: fashion, gardening, cooking, childbearing, knitting (Serena Joy's "form of procreation," thinks Offred [144]). In this novel, as in Bodily Harm, a central character

says to the heroine: "You have to break eggs to make an omlette" (Bodily Harm, 266; The Handmaid's Tale, 198)--a trite cliché on the surface but suddenly very significant when thought of in terms of male and female roles in procreation and the equation of egg with female. Male-dominated culture seems to think that it must destroy in order to create (as the new regime has done); thus it effects a false creation whose end result is self-satisfaction for the male: "Better doesn't mean better for everyone," states the Commander. "It always means worse, for some" (198).

The female connotations of "egg," furthermore, lead to an even more horrific translation: in the act of so-called "creation" in Gilead, there is no hesitation at destroying that which is female. The most important act of creation allowed women in this society--childbearing--is corrupted by males and the system they have implemented: Ofwarren (Janine), another handmaid, bears a child who dies within a few days, presumably because of the pollution, germ warfare, and nuclear chemical spills allowed in Gilead.[9] In addition, Janine has had a previous miscarriage in her eighth month--the trauma of which, combined with the trauma of the birth of her "unbaby," sends her into the insulation of insanity.

Most importantly, however, it is the handmaids who are blamed for the infertility of males in power: the women are the ones shuffled from household to household and given only three "chances" until their fertility is either proved or disproved and they are sent to clean up radioactive waste with other "useless" women.

In Gilead, to hint at male infertility is to blaspheme. It is never officially acknowledged, but the Wives are all aware of their husbands' inability to conceive children: the frequency of impregnation of handmaids by doctors and chauffeurs--all illegal liasons engineered by the Wives--attests to this awareness and also to their desperate desire for children, since the role of mother is what makes women tolerable in this society. The implication that the Wives themselves are too old to bear children is ironic because their position as barren women is infinitely more precarious than their husbands' positions as infertile men, and the Wives' greatest fear seems to be that they will be replaced by these young, fertile handmaids. When Offred arrives at this "posting," Serena Joy reminds her about the sanctity of marriage vows: "As for my husband . . . he's just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us part" (16). She knows that the supposedly sacred ties of marriage are not exempt from being revised to suit the desires of a patriarchy desperate for male Caucasion heirs. In fact, it is not difficult to imagine doctors and scientists who support the regime busily engaged in the invention of artificial wombs whereby women would become obsolete--except in their roles as objects of sexual gratification.[10]

Atwood takes ironic revenge on the patriarchal system she has created: the males in "potent" positions are actually impotent when it comes to procreation (i.e. infertile), thus they are actually to blame for the downward trend in Caucasion births--not, as these same

men assert, those "liberated" women who refused to stick to their traditional roles of wife and mother. Even more significantly, no male children-- indeed, no children at all--are being born in this society: in the "picturesque heart" of Gilead, "as in those pictures, those museums, those model towns [in magazines], there are no children" (23). A patriarchy assumes that there will be males to inherit, and the death of a patriarchy lies in its lack of male heirs.

In The Handmaid's Tale, the patriarchy forces upon its heirs, both male and female, the equation of the female with object. Women in this novel, as in Lady Oracle and Bodily Harm, are objects to be written and spoken, inscribed neatly into male texts. Offred is inscribed in both the fundamentalist state's text, which has need of her as a procreative vessel but which denies her any individual worth, and in the Commander's personal, private text, like the handmaid before her--an inscription infinitely more horrifying because it explicitly represents the wider political, public view of women as objects that can be manipulated to a male's satisfaction. The Commander's comments to Offred reveal this underlying attitude:

> Nature demands variety for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan. . . . Women know that instinctively. Why did they buy so many different clothes, in the old days? To trick the men into thinking they were several different women. A new one each day. (222)

In response, Offred states, "so now that we don't have different clothes . . . you merely have different women." The Commander's

response is simple: "It solves a lot of problems" (222)—problems had by men, naturally. To further solve their problems, this male-dominated theocracy implemements an enforced state of chastity upon women. Chastity is an instrument of oppression;[11] therefore, Offred's illicit sex with Nick is a form of rebellion, as is Moira's lesbianism. The Gothic, Holland and Sherman state, "says receiving, sexually and otherwise, can be a power position as well."[12] Offred and Moira thus gain power through sex, despite the theocracy's attempts to circumscribe their sexual contact.

Those proponents of the patriarchal theocracy in The Handmaid's Tale understand the power of the word and so try to deny women even the most rudimentary access to discourse by changing all the words in store signs to pictures: "even the names of shops were too much temptation for us" (24). In addition, women are denied the right to write: Offred tells rather than writes her story because she has "nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden" (37), and penis envy ("Pen Is Envy", her thought when the Commander allows her to write in his office) takes on a whole new meaning (174). Allowed symbolic recognition but not symbolic expression, women in The Handmaid's Tale are excluded from the master discourse and therefore from power by having forced upon them a kind of illiteracy—a ploy revealed in the "epilogue" where Professor Pieixoto quotes one of the Commanders of the Faith as stating, "Our big mistake was teaching them to read. We won't do that again" (289)—"them" referring, of course, to women.

Offred, in recording her experiences, actively, literally inscribes herself in the male texts of popular culture, in the form of Elvis Presley, Mantovani Mellow Strings, and Twisted Sister tapes.[13] "Although Offred uses the oppressor's language, she uses it to her advantage and fits it to her needs" (Freibert, 1988, 288). By telling her story, Offred is in control: "the act of narration is the only one she is able to initiate and direct" (Rubenstein, 1987, 103). Rubenstein goes on to state that "frequently the protagonist is the narrator, who, if not initially then ultimately, takes charge of the form and emphasis of her story as she evolves from victim to creator or interpreter of her experiences" (Rubenstein, 1987, 236). Offred repeatedly refers to "this story" she is telling: "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending . . . if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone" (37). This "control" ensures that Offred is not completely powerless. According to Lucy Freibert, "Offred's invention of her risk-filled story becomes the source of her freedom" (Freibert, 1988, 286). It is the thought of an audience—the existence of "you"—that keeps Offred going, that keeps her telling her story; it is the possibility of being heard that makes the risks of female self-expression worth undertaking.

The ultimate triumph of Atwood's protagonists is not that they heroically resist and overthrow the patriarchy, but that, in the end, they transform their experiences, gaining what to us (as we take our freedom for granted, as did the women "in the time before") may seem small victories but which, to Offred, are no less satisfying. The

Gothic ideology thus becomes a politics of transformation: the ability to survive depends on the ability to transform the negative and to reclaim some kind of dignity and any small measure of power possible. Offred's manipulation of the Commander affords her a certain amount of power, even though hand lotion and Scrabble are, according to Freibert, "empty gains" (Freibert, 1988, 288). These are empty gains, in terms of the amount of power they offer, and this is what we must ask ourselves: Are these kinds of power (these kinds of gains) all we, as women, want? We are thus forced to question how far Offred has really come in refusing to be a victim.

As Offred states, however, "context is all": what would have seemed like empty gains "in the time before" now becomes a major score. Atwood herself states, "you can only measure affirmation in terms of what it's set against" (Brans 311). Thus there is an obvious transformation of the Gothic happening in terms of Offred's manipulation of power, but whether or not we can go so far as to call it an "affirmation" is questionable.

This ability to transform involves, for the Gothic heroine, "a shift from being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor."[14] After all, survival against all odds is itself a victory: "I intend to last," states Offred (17)—and she does, albeit trivialized and all but ignored by a male academic tradition. Like Rennie's story, Offred's story offers us a chance to enact a "new story," even if the narrator may never get that chance.[15] Offred is indicative of "women's ability to evade [patriarchal] institutions by

offering an alternative concept of power" (Howells, 1987, 63), even though it may be merely the power of a slave: "the power of a dog bone, passive but there" (22), the ability to withhold one's real name, whispering it to oneself like "an amulet, [or] some charm" (79),[16] the ability to forgive (127), the ability to revel in the feeling of romance inherent in a flower garden (143), of "whispering obscenities, about those in power" (208), of forming friendships when friendships are forbidden, of writing, of speaking, of surviving when all odds seem against it. Atwood thus shows how women are enabled to continue living when their entire existence is based on denial of any kind of agency.

"Atwood demonstrates through Offred that women, able to take risks and to tell stories, may transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices, and reconstruct the social order" (Friebert, 1988, 285). By continuing to see Nick, Offred reclaims her body; by telling her story, she manages to overcome her object status as well as her theoretical silencing. Offred herself does not reconstruct the social order, but she gives us a chance to do so, through reading her story. Offred comes to understand that, as Howells states, "language is the agent through which social consciousness is changed" (Howells, 1987, 57). Through language, Offred, Rennie, and Joan become active agents against the patriarchal societies in which they live. In addition, they undermine and subvert this patriarchal system: in the guise of popular culture—the romances, the glossy magazines, the Mantovani Strings

tapes ("the language of the oppressor," but the only resources left to them)—these women find media for their own expression. Theirs is a foreign language, a subtext hidden to those who would perpetuate the master discourse.[17] These women "[threaten] the system by telling [their] tale" (Freibert, 1988, 285); furthermore, "[t]his self-generation frees [them] from the limitation of biological determinism" (Freibert, 1988, 287) enforced in a male-dominated culture reluctant to share its power.

The Handmaid's Tale is finally about the invalidation of women and their struggles to validate themselves. Offred anticipates Professor Pieixoto's final dismissal of her narrative when she puns on the word "invalid": "The arrival of the tray, carried up the stairs as if for an invalid. An invalid, one who has been invalidated" (210). A few pages later she muses, "From the point of view of future history, . . . we'll be invisible" (214)—sensing, perhaps, how accurate her prediction would turn out to be. Professor Pieixoto's paper reveals how, as Hutcheon states, women's history is "either ignored or trivialized by the academic tradition" (Hutcheon 18). Even though the chair of the conference where the "Historical Notes" takes place is a woman— Maryann Crescent Moon—she is also invalidated by Professor Pieixoto through his "jokes" on Arctic Chair and Arctic Char—a play on words also foreseen by Offred:

> I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others. (104)

Professor Pieixoto's pun relegates women to the status of sexual object and shows that "these facts" are connected.

Professor Pieixoto goes on to criticise Offred's account of her imprisonment as not being much help in piecing together an historical account of Gilead: "She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy" (292). His hesitancy at calling Offred's narrative a "document" (283) at first seems logical, since he explains that the narrative consists of cassettes, but in light of his later comments, it is obvious that his hesitancy stems from a reluctance to afford any historical validity to her account. He longs for a printout from the Commander's personal computer--a supposedly valuable document. Professor Pieixoto's dismissal of Offred's story forces readers and critics to re-evaluate their approach to "women's" stories and to question the dismissal tactics used by (for example) Joan's interviewer in Lady Oracle, Rennie's boss in Bodily Harm, and Professor Pieixoto in The Handmaid's Tale. Yes, there are questions, and by forcing her readers to face them, Atwood challenges the genres that supposedly limit women and transforms these genres--namely the Gothic--into a means of control and, ultimately, of survival.

NOTES:

[1] Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1985 rpt. 1986). Unless otherwise indicated, all page references cited in this text will refer to this edition.

[2] Linda Hutcheon, The Canadian Postmodern (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988), 156. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Hutcheon."

[3] Lucy M. Freibert, "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale" in Judith McCombs ed., Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1988), 280. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Freibert, 1988."

[4] Coral Ann Howells, Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970's and 1980's (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1987), 62. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Howells, 1987."

[5] Roberta Rubenstein, Boundaries of the Self: Gender, culture, fiction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 77. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Rubenstein, 1987."

[6] J. Brans, "Using What You're Given [Interview]," The Southwestern Review 68(Autumn 1983), 183. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Brans."

[7] Joanna Russ, "Someone's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic" in Juliann E. Fleenor ed., The Female Gothic (Montreal: Eden Press Inc., 1983), 32. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Russ."

[8] Tania Modleski, Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982), 60. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Modleski."

[9] It is not so surprising that Nature, habitually thought of as feminine, is so plundered and exploited by the Gilead regime.

[10] I do not refer to these women as prostitutes because they are denied any agency and any economic independence.

[11] Ann McMillan, "The Transforming Eye: Lady Oracle and Gothic Tradition," in Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, eds., Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 56. Subsequent page

references will be cited in the text, preceded by "McMillan."

[12] Norman Holland and Leona Sherman, "Gothic Possibilities," New Literary History 8(Winter 1977), 288. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Holland and Sherman."

[13] One of the tapes Offred uses to record her story is "Mantovani's Mellow Strings" (284), a conscious echo of the tape Joan dances to in the Royal Porcupine's loft in Lady Oracle and an additional sign of how Atwood has transformed the Gothic from an escape into a means of self-realization.

[14] Amin Malak, "Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature 112(Spring 1987), 13.

[15] In what seems to be a regression from Bodily Harm, Atwood, through Offred, offers only individual power and survival, not a collective (and therefore truly revolutionary) transformation. But, once again, we readers must realize that we can enact a new story from Offred's tale, as we could from Rennie's. The didactic intent of The Handmaid's Tale cannot go unnoticed. It is true, however, that in attempting to recuperate Offred and make her into a powerful figure, critics tend to ignore the fate of the rest of the female population.

[16] Lucy Freibert states, "Atwood teases by placing a list of Handmaid's names at the beginning of the novel, leaving it to the reader to eliminate them one by one as Offred's former name. Finally June alone remains unidentified. Aunt Lydia comes near to revelation: 'No mooning and Juning around here, girls,' she warns (206)" (Freibert, 1988, 291n).

[17] In support of a subtext of subversive female language, Offred states, "The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all" (259). By not listing the crimes of the victims of the Salvagings, the regime attempts to deny this secret language and thus deny any female power.

Chapter V: Conclusion: Atwood's Transformative Gothic

> If you write about a woman in this society, this society being what it is, you automatically express those things [that females experience], unless you're writing Harlequin romances. And even those are an upside-down expression of the same thing.[1]

With the above comment, Atwood reveals her understanding of popular Gothic romances as a space for what Janice Radway calls "the expression of previously repressed resentment at male domination" and as a certain form of female defiance of social expectations[2] (as the equalizing of power is used by the Brontës, for example). Coral Ann Howells argues, however, that Atwood's three "Gothic" novels--Lady Oracle, Bodily Harm, and The Handmaid's Tale--demonstrate "increasingly bleak scenarios"[3] in terms of the literal circumstances of each heroine, "bleakly [confirming] female dread [but] . . . also [exposing] the damaging falsities of traditional gothic . . . that . . . women are innocent and powerless" (Howells, 1987, 58). In all of Atwood's fiction, as Susan Rosowski states, "Gothic horror exists 'not beyond social patterns, rational decisions, and institutionally approved emotions,' but within them."[4] Atwood's fictions are recuperative in ways that differ from traditional or popular Gothic romance conventions.

According to Linda Hutcheon, Atwood sees each of her artist-protagonists "as both the instigator of the creative process and . . . as a product of her own art."[5] In Atwood's hands, Hutcheon goes on to say, ". . . parody [of the Gothic] becomes the formal mode of voicing a social and cultural critique of the destinies of women: as authors, as characters (in the narratives of life and art), and as readers"; parody, although used as a distancing device in some cases, such as Lady Oracle, is thus an ultimately political strategy (Hutcheon 132). Atwood's final message could be interpreted as urging even more feminist action, since, according to Coral Ann Howells, "some radical feminist positions run the risk of being appropriated by the dominant power group and then exploited as a new instrument for female oppression" (Howells, 1987, 65), as shown by the existence of the Aunts in The Handmaid's Tale. Atwood demonstrates through her writing that the "ideal of innocent victimhood is self-destructive";[6] it forces women to be victims and men to be rescuers or attackers, thus locking both men and women into limited roles that leave no room for deviation. For Atwood's heroines, guilt in complicity with their victimization provides the paradox of new strength (McMillan 60-61). Joan, Rennie, and Offred's realizations of their complicity push them to acts of creation, of self-actualization—storytelling[7]—that actually forge for them an identity outside the narrow definitions afforded them by the patriarchy. In addition, "[their] genuinely harmful [acts] of anger and rebellion [are] potentially healthier" than passive acceptance of

their victimization, because anger and rebellion enable these heroines to realize their own fragmentation and subsequently to remedy that fragmentation by revealing a facet of their own personalities that they were not aware existed (McMillan 62): for example, Joan hits the reporter over the head with the Cinzanzo bottle; Rennie "writes" for social change (or vows she will); Offred continues to have sex with Nick, despite the fact that it is a crime punishable by death. Atwood's protagonists break out of the Gothic heroine mold because, unlike Gothic heroines, who "cannot be both controlling author and victimized heroine, for those roles are not compatible,"[8] Atwood's heroines <u>are</u> both, and, through the course of each novel, refuse victimized heroine roles and emerge as triumphant, controlling authors. Atwood's revisionist Gothic romances thus provide a space for women to re-create literary genres in order to create themselves and to reconstruct the social order. The Gothic is transformed from a figurative "escape," in the form of Joan's "Mantovani's Mellow Strings" record, to a literal escape, a tool of survival, in the form of Offred's "Mantovani's Mellow Strings" tape, which she uses to record her story. While, in Barbara Hill Rigney's words, "[t]he very act of writing, of recording, is for Atwood as well as for her heroines, the final and irrevocable committment to one's society and to one's own humanity,"[9] Atwood, in her fiction, is more explicit about what <u>kinds</u> of acts of writing and recording constitute "irrevocable committment." Acts of liberation do not include Joan's writing of Costume Gothics, nor

Rennie's writing of glossy magazine pieces on fashion, nor Offred's glorified data-entry job at the library, nor her "liberated" marriage to Luke. Through her fiction, Atwood encourages women to transform the genres of popular culture (such as the Gothic romance) that have been set out by male-dominated society as a means for recording women's stories, and to create their own genres that will appropriately express the experiences of their gender.

NOTES:

[1] Kathryn VanSpanckeren, "An Interview With Margaret Atwood," in Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, eds., Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 230.

[2] Janice Radway, "The Utopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Gothic Romances and 'Feminist' Protest," American Quarterly 33(1981), 158. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Radway, 1981."

[3] Coral Ann Howells, Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970's and 1980's (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988), 70. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Howells, 1988."

[4] Susan J. Rosowski, "Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle: Fantasy and the Modern Gothic Novel," in Judith McCombs, ed., Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1988), 207. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Rosowski."

[5] Linda Hutcheon, The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988), 145. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "Hutcheon."

[6] Ann McMillan, "The Transforming Eye: Lady Oracle and Gothic Tradition," in Kathryn VanSpanckeren and Jan Garden Castro, eds., Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 56. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "McMillan."

[7] Linda Hutcheon (The Canadian Postmodern), Coral Ann Howells (Private and Fictional Words), and Atwood herself ("An End To Audience?" in Second Words) would all agree, I think, that some kind of collective transformation is achieved through "audience participation"--that is, through the necessary acts of reading, listening, seeing, etc. that complete the postmodern cycle of writer-reader, speaker-listener, etc. (which Offred, with her repeated references to "you," her audience, is very explicit about in her narrative).

[8] Susan Jaret McKinstry, "Living Literally by the Pen: The Self-Conceived and Self-deceiving Heroine-Author in Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle," in Beatrice Mendez-Egle, ed., Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality (Edinburg, Texas: Pan American University, 1987), 60. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, preceded by "McKinstry."

[9] Barbara Hill Rigney, Margaret Atwood (London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1987), 121.

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